

# **UNIVERSITIES' REPUTATION**

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Juan Manuel Mora

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# VI. CULTIVATING REPUTATION WITH THE AID OF COMMUNICATION

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout these pages we have been reflecting on the nature and management of reputation. We have examined what it is, its value, how it is measured and, in particular, what constitutes the reputation of universities and its essential elements. It is now time to focus on the role of media in shaping reputation.

On several occasions I have heard the story of an episode that apparently occurred at the University of Cambridge. A visitor, impressed by the grounds, asked someone who worked there how the university had managed to create such a marvelous campus. “Very simply,” he replied. “There is no great secret; you simply have to water the grass every day for 700 years.”

I do not know whether this story is fact or legend, but it has influenced the choice of the title of my chapter. In these pages we will see that communication departments, as well as gardeners, can also contribute to cultivating a reputation.

I will divide my presentation into three parts: first, I will create a model that explains how a reputation is acquired; I will then discuss how reputation is cared for; and in the third part, I will describe the role that, in my opinion, communication plays in this cultivation.

## 2. THE PROCESS OF FORMING REPUTATION

As previously discussed in the third chapter, it is not difficult to understand how reputation is lost. By now we have witnessed not a small number of reputational crises that have affected individuals, organizations, financial institutions, and political parties. Among this variety of situations, two common features can be identified within these crises: incorrect behavior and an exposed lie. Together, these elements cause organizations to lose their credibility, legitimacy and reputation, and some have even disappeared altogether as a result. Reputation is essential for the prosperity, and even survival, of organizations. The digital environment has further accelerated the timing of reputational crises, which are now explosive (Heimmans and Timms).

But here we are not interested in analyzing how reputation is lost, but rather how it is acquired. We know that these processes are “asymmetrical,” i.e., although reputation cannot be acquired in a brief period of time, it can vanish in an instant. By the way, we use the verb “acquire” throughout to talk about reputation because it appropriately expresses the sum of positive intangibles that are arranged out there in the collective imagination. Thus, as the song goes, reputation “is neither bought nor sold,” only acquired or earned, exactly like trust.

To explain the process of reputation, I will use a model that provides what might be called an “anthropological paradigm,” that is, it proposes an understanding of the reputation of organizations by referring to the reputation of individuals<sup>1</sup>. The model includes three phases: the first takes place within the organization; the second, with stakeholder or interest groups; and the third, in the sphere of the general public. Each of these stages is summarized in turn in three keywords<sup>2</sup>.

To graphically illustrate how this process works, we are going to use the icon of the Conference, the iceberg<sup>3</sup>.

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1 Some communication theorists believe the anthropological model, which understands communication as a “meeting,” better reflects the reality than the cybernetic model, which conceives communication as a “transmission process” (the classic sequence: transmitter, channel, message, receiver, feedback).

2 Like all models, this one has some limits. To mention two: a) it artificially dissects a reality that is organic in nature; and b) it does not develop sequentially in time, but simultaneously, often without a specific order.

3 I would like to congratulate designer Jokin Pagola for successfully selecting this image.

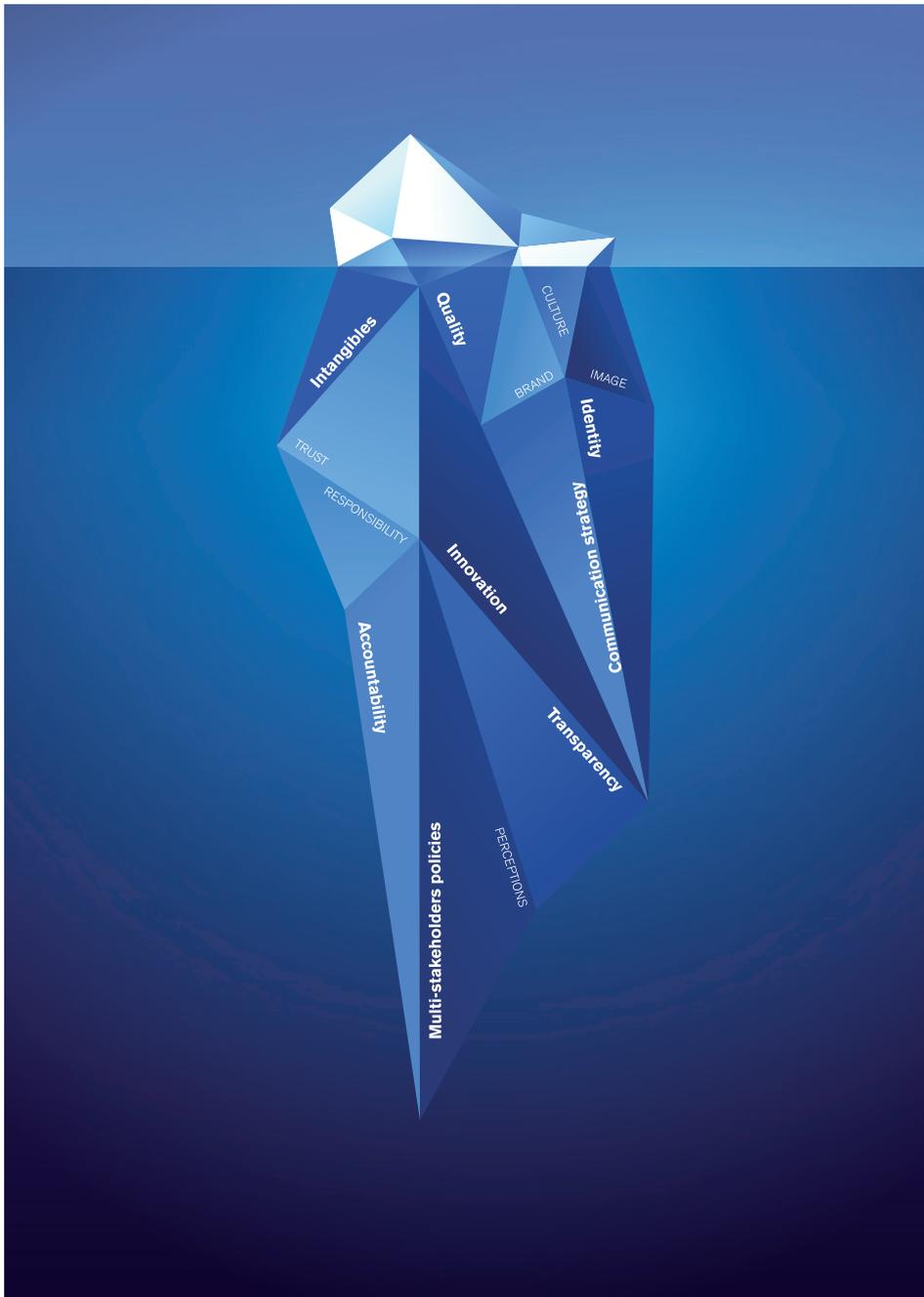


Fig. 4. Reputation elements

## 2.1. At the heart of the organization

The first phase of the model for the creation of reputation includes the identity, culture and discourse of the organization:

- *Identity*. In the world of organizations, identity is formed by history, mission, vision, values and purpose. In the case of people and, similarly, institutions, identity is formulated objectively (“who I am”), but also includes a subjective dimension (“how I understand myself”). That is, it is a projected and reflected identity<sup>4</sup>. The word “brand” is often used to symbolize the identity of an organization, provided it is understood as an icon of corporate personality and not as a simple graphic expression. Thus understood, the brand expresses a double meaning of belonging and differentiation (Hatch and Schultz).
- *Culture*. Personal identity is expressed in behavior, while corporate identity is expressed in culture: collective behavior, policies, common practices, the way teachers and students are treated, and interaction with the environment. We can therefore say an organization is “project directed,” “goal directed” and that it provides mission-based leadership”. In other words, its governance policies aim to align identity, culture and strategy.
- *Discourse*. Human beings are rational and open to dialogue. The spoken and written word help us reflect and shape our thoughts and motivations. Something similar happens with organizations: the motive and significance of what they do is shaped by their public message<sup>5</sup>. If identity requires “brand architecture,” and if culture involves “brand experience,” then discourse evokes a “brand narrative.” The corporate story helps strengthen the sense of belonging while maintaining differentiation.

Identity. Culture. Discourse. In this initial phase of the process of developing reputation, consistency is required between what I am, what I do and what I say. Many communication problems arise from an inconsistency between these three aspects of corporate personality.

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4 Corporate personality (organizational identity) “embraces the subject at its most profound level. It is the soul, the persona, the spirit, the culture of the organization manifested in some way. A corporate personality is not necessarily something tangible that you can see, feel or touch –although it may be. The tangible manifestation of a corporate personality is a corporate identity. It is the identity that projects and reflects the reality of corporate personality” (Olins 212, qtd. in Cornelissen 71).

5 “Communication is more effective if companies have a strong corporate story as inspiration for all their internal and external communication programs. A story is difficult to imitate and promotes coherence and consistency between the various corporate messages” (Van Riel 163, qtd. in Argenti 48).

## 2.2. In the sphere of stakeholders

The second phase focuses on how the organization relates to and communicates with stakeholders, and how it acquires knowledge on stakeholder perceptions:

- *Relationships*. An organization builds relationships with various stakeholders<sup>6</sup>. We might even say that an organization is a network of relationships. People relate with relatives, friends, colleagues, and neighbors; universities relate, with students, teachers and businesses. One author distinguishes between “contractual” relationships (economic, professional and employment agreements), and “communitarian” ones (links that do not involve an exchange of legal rights or duties)<sup>7</sup>. The nature of the link determines its content: providing a service, earning a salary or collaborating on a project. In addition, different relationships generate different expectations, which play an important role in the development of reputation. In short, the quality of an organization depends on the quality of its relationships.
- *Conversations*. Organizations use different channels to establish a dialogue with each stakeholder. In addition to helping supply a product or render a service, dialogues provide information, context and meaning. They are also a source of information about stakeholder demands and expectations. Just as the organization’s discourse gives content and meaning to identity and culture, dialogue gives substance and meaning to relationships<sup>8</sup>.
- *Perceptions*. As a result of relationships and conversations, stakeholders form their own perceptions, which may or may not conform to their expectations. Perceptions are the result of the dialogue between organizations and their contacts. Perceptions possess rational and emotional components, and are essentially subjective, but have objective consequences: decisions, choices and behaviors that –are directly conditioned by perceptions. They often produce conflicts of interest between contacts and, therefore, conflicting perceptions: an action can be perceived favorably by one stakeholder and negatively by another.

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6 “A stakeholder is any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s purpose and objectives” (Freeman 46, qtd. in Cornelissen 61).

7 “Contractual stakeholders (customers, employees, distributors, suppliers, shareholders, lenders). Community stakeholders (consumers, regulators, government, media, local communities, pressure groups)” (Cornelissen 62).

8 “We talk about the quality of product and service. What about the quality of our relationships, the quality of our communications, the quality of our promises to each other?” (Max de Pree, qtd. in Delahaye xvii).

Relationships. Conversations. Perceptions. Together they constitute a multifaceted, evolving environment. Therefore, at this stage in the process of developing a reputation, a 360-degree perspective is required that takes into account the full range of perceptions of the different stakeholders.

### 2.3. Public opinion<sup>9</sup>

The last phase is aimed at ensuring that the general public recognize the organization as it is, as it claims to be and as it is renowned for being:

- *Image*. The word “image” indicates that an organization is identified and known not only by those who have maintained a relationship with it, as in the case of a university and its alumni, but also by those with only indirect experience of the organization. For people to choose an organization, they must first be aware of it. If potential contacts do not know about an organization, they can hardly engage with it, which explains the efforts made by organizations to achieve visibility and notoriety in the sphere of public opinion.
- *Reputation*. Reputation adds something to an organization’s image. Besides an awareness of the organization, it includes an assessment, whether positive or negative. Positive assessments arise when perceptions about an organization are favorable, relevant and sustained over time, and when the relationship and dialogues have been satisfactory and expectations have been met or exceeded. A good reputation makes it easier to pass from awareness to choice (“I choose your product or service”) or even to making a recommendation (“I recommend it to others”)<sup>10</sup>.
- *Authority*. We could say that the highest level of reputation is authority. The term is used here to express the attitude of public opinion towards certain institutions, when these opinions and viewpoints are considered references in the field. This happens in all sectors, especially in scientific matters: the general public hopes for and seeks an “authoritative voice” on specific topics. Institutions with authority are recognized, appreciated and recom-

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9 We must distinguish between published opinion (which is limited to what appears in the media), and public opinion (which is a broader concept: the socially shared opinion).

10 “Reputation is a perceptual representation of a company's past action and future prospects that describe the firm overall appeal to all of its key constituents when compared to other rivals” (Fombrun, qtd. in Cornelissen 72).

mended, and their opinions and advice are also sought after taken into account<sup>11</sup>.

As mentioned above, the first phase in the process of reputation development requires internal coherence between what I am, what I do and what I say. The second involves looking at the perceptions of different stakeholders with an open mind. The third phase now calls for consistency: to achieve a good reputation and authority, the organization must continue to do things well and the perceptions of stakeholders must remain positive over time (Calderón).

### 3. CULTIVATING REPUTATION

With this proposal of the model for the process of developing reputation, an old Latin adage comes to mind that ostensibly has little to do with our topic: *bonum ex integra causa, malum is quocumque defectu*, or “an action is good when good in every respect; it is wrong when wrong in any respect.”

Although this medieval verdict was used in an entirely different context, it has been successfully applied to the cinema: for a film to be excellent, it must have good actors, a good script, music, photography and everything else<sup>12</sup>. Failing in just one of these areas is enough for the whole film to fail.

We can say the same about reputation. This sum of intangibles requires the concurrence of multiple causes. Reputation is based on what an organization is, does and says. The organization has to fail in only one important area for its reputation to decline.

These ideas can be expressed another way: reputation is not a product, but an accomplishment. It cannot be made or built, but is prepared, cultivated and protected. Just as it is not possible to rush growth in nature, neither is it possible to calculate the time it takes to cultivate an organization’s reputation. It involves that working well over a long period of time. Therefore, acquiring a reputation has more to do with cultivation than with production.

Cultivation begins with planting seeds. In my opinion, the “seeds” of reputation are what we might call “causal attributes,” i.e., those features of identity and culture that create “image attributes,” i.e., the positive and negative intangible ways of being, acting and speaking that generate favorable and unfavorable perceptions among stakeholders. A correlation can be drawn between these and other attrib-

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11 The use of the term “authority” in the last phase in the process comes from Alfonso Nieto (114-29).

12 This concept is used in the world of cinema by Professor Juan José García-Noblejas.

utes: creativity is perceived as leadership, honesty as and credibility and a job well done as quality.

If we accept that this dynamic exists in the development of reputation, then it follows that, to improve perceptions, we must work on the blueprints of identity and relationships, not of image. To improve reputation, reality must be improved. And in the case of universities, as mentioned by Professor Naval in her chapter, reputation is perceived quality and quality cannot be perceived in the absence of objective quality (see “Reputation, Quality and Success” 26).

This reflection has practical consequences. The first is that cultivating a reputation is the responsibility of everyone in the organization. All employees can contribute something to the causal attributes by creating a culture that is later reflected in the organization’s public image. The professionals who form part of the organization must see themselves as actors and ambassadors of their organization’s reputation.

Expressed another way, reputation is not a sector-related activity, but a dimension of the organization. All organizations have financial departments, whose members must all know how much things cost, make responsible decisions and worry about tangible issues. Something similar happens with reputation: everyone has to share the attitude of transparency, participate in the public conversation and worry about the intangibles.

The second practical consequence is supervision. Does cultivating reputation affect an organization’s identity, culture, discourse, relationships and conversations? Do the effects of reputation help the organization achieve strategic goals and objectives? If so, we must conclude that, without underestimating the role of the organization’s entire group of professionals, the governing body is ultimately responsible for maintaining and enhancing both the tangible and intangible aspects of the organization’s heritage.

This responsibility for the organization’s reputation requires a particular form of government. To paraphrase a well-known Spanish philosopher, it requires a “new sensitivity” in the management of organizations (Llano)<sup>13</sup>. This sensitivity must take into account tangible and intangible values, and understand how to lead a mission-based organization without losing sight of objectives. The management style must be transparent, tell the truth and understand the need for dialogue. It must include employee participation, be able to establish strong relationships, and

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13 It has also been expressed in another way: “We are moving from a hierarchical, monolithic and multinational model to a horizontal, interconnected and globally integrated model.” (Arthur W. Page Society, qtd. in Argenti 48).

understand that the common good is synonymous with its own good<sup>14</sup>. This is the profile of managers responsible for cultivating reputation in an organization.

As mentioned above, reputation is everyone's responsibility and is the specific responsibility of senior management. Just as there is a department that coordinates the organization's economic affairs and manages its tangible assets, every management team should have a department that coordinates communication tasks and helps manage the organization's intangible assets<sup>15</sup>. This is the role of the communication department.

## 4. THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION

This section is divided into three parts: we will first examine the powers of the department, which are aligned with the sequence of the cultivation of reputation summarized in the first section of this chapter. We will then discuss strategic issues before concluding with some proposals of an organizational nature.

### 4.1. Tasks of the communication department

The process of cultivating a reputation provides clues about the work of the communication department, which has to take responsibility for stimulating this process so that it does not slow down or come to a halt in any of its phases. This impulse involves the following skills:

1. *Helping to make identity explicit.* This is the first task. It is a job of synthesis and linking corporate memory with corporate promises, i.e. linking identity to the project. It endeavors to highlight the value of the brand and the essential attributes that make the institution unique, distinct and recognizable. This work involves a process of collective reflection until a corporate identity emerges that reflects an inward sense of belonging and generates an, outward, sense of differentiation.

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14 "In a national survey of US public relations professionals, two related positive leadership styles were found: transformational and inclusive. Transformational leaders inspire followers through communications, and inclusive leaders actively seek the participation of others. In combination the styles positively affect the strategy and outcomes of public relations" (Gregory and Willis 84).

15 Reputation Management and Communication is "one of the few functions able to provide steering committees and boards with a comprehensive look at the entire organization, and the political and social reality of the countries where the company operates; a function that looks beyond the short term and is able to identify risks and opportunities that will boost the ongoing transformation of the company on a path of excellence" (Argenti 71-2).

2. *Helping to create culture.* Based on a defined, shared identity, communication helps strengthen the corporate culture. It does so through approved internal communication that, recognizes employees as protagonists and brand ambassadors, and considers them participants and not mere recipients of information. It relies on them to embody the organization's values and maintain relationships with its contacts.
3. *Identifying stakeholders, cultivating relationships with them.* By its nature as an "observatory," the communication department is able to identify stakeholders that are relevant for the organization. It must also help promote relations with each one at different levels of the organization<sup>16</sup>.
4. *Developing discourse, maintaining dialogue.* This is one of the most specifically communicative tasks. It includes copywriting, choosing photographs, video editing, and preparing information for internal and external dissemination. This helps define the discourse and provides content for conversations with stakeholders. The task is bidirectional because it also involves listening, interpreting, translating and transmitting messages received through formal and informal channels from the organization's different stakeholders.
5. *Gathering information on the activity and perceptions.* The communication department must have extensive knowledge about the organization and its performance. It must also be acutely aware of the different stakeholders' perceptions. Facts and perceptions compose a picture that can lead to practical conclusions, provided you know how to make the leap from specific cases to a specific strategy, as Professor Lostao points out in her chapter (see "Strategic Management" 48).
6. *Proposing innovative projects.* Based on its relationships and conversations, the communication department acquires an accurate picture of stakeholder expectations, the social needs in the organization's environment and the contribution the organization could make. With this knowledge, innovative proposals can emerge to help improve the organization. A clear need has been identified of achieving communication that is "transformative" and not merely "summative" or "diffusive."

In view of these issues, I would like to make a brief digression on measuring quality.

It is clear that measurements are important because you can only direct what can be measured. Therefore, the communication department must be provided

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16 "So what really matters is your relationships and the aggregated outcome of those relationships: your reputation. Today, if you're not measuring the health of your relationships, you won't be in business for very long" (Delahaye 6).

with a scorecard and a reasonable set of indicators<sup>17</sup>. But, to use a metaphor from the world of sports, it is more important to generate play than to measure it. The most important thing is not the number of kilometers run, the yellow cards or corner shots taken during a match. What's important is playing well, scoring goals and winning. Communication departments should work with this idea in mind.

#### **4.2. A strategic vision of communication<sup>18</sup>**

Let's leave the process of forming reputation for a moment and return to the metaphor of cultivation. So far, we have considered the importance of creating an internal culture that pays attention to both intangibles and relationships, and have established that the organizations's governing body is responsible for achieving this.

Recent trends indicate that senior managers increasingly value communication and are willing to include communication directors on the governing bodies of their organizations, but have difficulty doing so because they cannot find candidates with enough professional experience in the field of communication who also, possess leadership skills<sup>19</sup>.

This shortage identifies an important goal for communication departments, especially for the people who manage them: learning the art of administration. This involves learning to have a broad view of the entire organization, including its strategic vision, and being concerned about long-term results in key areas. It also means developing a team perspective that includes the entire organization, rather than a single department or sector.

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17 We should measure without the skepticism that Winston Churchill expressed about statistics: "The only statistics you can trust are those you falsified yourself" (qtd. in Delahaye 33).

18 "Corporate Communication is a management function that offers a framework and vocabulary for the effective coordination of all means of communications with the overall purpose of establishing and maintaining favorable relationships with stakeholder groups upon which the organization is dependent" (Cornelissen 23).

19 "Most CEOs and chairs interviewed in the studies indicated earlier do understand its importance and wish to employ very senior and skilled practitioners. Their problem is that they find it very difficult to recruit individuals with the right capabilities" (Gregory and Willis 87).

This will give, the communication director authority<sup>20</sup>, the communication department will be at the same the level of excellence as other departments, and communication and will reach its full potential for contribution<sup>21</sup>.

In fact, experience shows that veteran communication directors dedicate more time to the general affairs of the organization than to their own departments. This naturally presupposes excellence in the performance of technical tasks, such as branding, internal and external communication, and knowledge of perceptions. But something more is being asked of them: they are able to provide the viewpoint in terms of communication in decision-making processes in all areas.

Just as the organization's financial departments are expected to produce positive economic results and have an excellent command of accounting procedures, communication departments are tasked with providing intangible value, i.e., an increase in the organization's reputation, and are assumed to have an excellent command of communication techniques.

In short, communication departments help cultivate an organization's reputation in two ways: through excellence in communication activities, and excellence in management actions.

### **4.3. Organization of the department**

At this point, we might ask about the practical implications of these considerations when it comes to organizing communication departments. I think that they can be summarized in the following idea: in order to cultivate a reputation, communication departments should be organized with a higher, broader, and deeper vision.

*A higher vision.* Communication, reputation and management of intangibles should have a place in the governing bodies of universities and, specifically, on rectors' teams. This is the only vantage point that provides a 360-degree perspective that includes the organization's different areas of activity, stakeholder perceptions and strategies. Only from this perspective can intangibles be managed.

*A broader vision.* University communication departments have taken on some tasks that are often outside the scope of their own activity, including internal communication and corporate culture, brand management, knowledge of perceptions, social responsibility and institutional relations. This broader view probably involves organizing communication departments differently.

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20 Elena Gutierrez has referred to the concept *auctoritas* and *potestas* in the field of strategic communication management (Gutiérrez and Rodríguez Virgili 25-36).

21 An excellent summary of this learning policy can be found in Gregory and Willis.

*A more profound vision.* If improving reputation involves improving reality, communication has to be transformative, i.e., it must propose projects that actually help improve universities. To do this, communication departments should establish partnerships with the university departments concerned with quality and strategic projects to ensure that the assessment of intangibles is never left out of these university projects.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

From everything outlined above, it follows that the strategic communication of universities is facing three major challenges:

1. University administrative teams must accept that their work includes managing intangibles, and they must become qualified to do it.
2. Those responsible for communication departments must understand that their work has an administrative dimension and they must be qualified to do it.
3. Together, they are able to involve the entire organization in the task of recognizing the organization's identity, interpreting its environment, and adapting and innovating to improve its reputation.

If communication departments begin working in this way, the contribution they can make to their universities becomes clearer: they can help ensure that objective quality becomes perceived quality, and that quality becomes reputation. This, in turn, will help the university attain the social respect and support it deserves.