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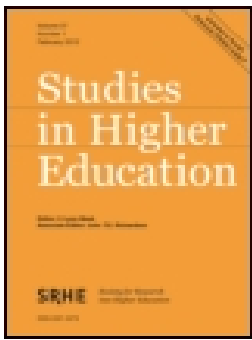
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## Constructing a national higher education brand for the UK: positional competition and promised capitals

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This article examines national branding of UK higher education, a strategic intent and action to collectively brand UK higher education with the aim to attract prospective international students, using a Bourdieusian approach to understanding promises of capitals. We trace its development between 1999 and 2014 through a sociological study, one of the first of its kind, from the 'Education UK' and subsumed under the broader 'Britain is GREAT' campaign of the Coalition Government. The findings reveal how a national higher education brand is construed by connecting particular representations of the nation with those of prospective international students and the higher education sector, which combine in the brand with promises of capitals to convert into positional advantage in a competitive environment. The conceptual framework proposed here seeks to connect national higher education branding to the concept of the competitive state, branded as a nation and committed to the knowledge economy.

**Keywords:** branding; international students; international education; capitals; marketization; neo-liberalism

### Introduction

The attraction and recruitment of international students has been a policy priority at the UK national level since the 1979 introduction of full-cost tuition fees (Belcher 1987; Walker 2014). A national policy of full-cost fees for international students resulted not only in immediate income, necessary for the financial health of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), but also in economic benefits for the state and the economy. International students in Britain garnered for instance over £2.7 billion in revenue for the HE sector in 2011–2012 (HEFCE 2013). In London universities where 18% of the total student population are international, the fee income contributed in 2013–2014 was in the region of £1 billion, accounting for 39% of their total fee income (London First & PwC 2015). Furthermore, approximately 70,000 jobs in London have been attributed to international students' expenditure on fees and subsistence (London First & PwC 2015). Therefore, the policy shift in 1979, associated with the accession of the Thatcher Government, led to a recognition that international students financially benefit the

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universities, the state and the economy instead of being considered as a burden to the public purse (Bolsmann and Miller 2008). The policy has successfully sustained over the last decades with the capacity to attract international students, and international higher education taking on an ever-greater economic imperative. Recent estimates of the impact of Universities on the UK economy show that higher education generates nearly £11bn per annum in export earnings (Universities UK 2014), with fees alone contributing £7.2 billion (Universities UK 2015).

Increasing competitive pressure from traditional and recent entrants in the competitive arena of global higher education, and heavy reliance on this income, led in 1999 to the UK developing a national brand for higher education. The 'Education UK' brand strategy was launched in 1999 by Tony Blair's Prime Minister's Initiative (PMI), later incorporated under the broader 'Britain is GREAT' campaign created by the 2010–2015 Coalition Government.

The strategic importance of developing a UK national brand can be linked to a variety of factors. First, the income generated by international students contributes, as explained above, to the UK economy as a whole, and to the finances of the HE sector. International tuition fees have become essential for many institutions, in a context of regular cuts to government funding (Sastry 2006), constituting 13% of the sector's income in 2013–2014 (Universities UK 2015).

Second, while the UK has remained in second place as top destination for international student mobility (OECD 2014) attracting 13% of all foreign students, global competition for international students is intensifying. Traditional destination countries such as the USA and the UK must contend with heightened marketing from Australia, New Zealand and Canada (Marginson 2006). In addition, more recent entrants to the market, such as Malaysia and Singapore, now offer foreign education in branch campuses (TNE) and recruit to domestic institutions (Tham 2010; Mok 2012). European countries are also internationalizing further, seeking more inbound students by increasing English-language provision (OBHE 2013).

Third, higher education as a vehicle for influencing soft power (Nye 2004) and a sphere of influence (Naiddoo 2011) is very important to the British government. As the UK has found itself competing both economically and politically in an increasingly commodified global arena of higher education, it has embraced commercial marketing logics to brand a national system of higher education internationally. While UK universities have engaged in reputation building activities in disparate ways, these two initiatives mark a clear break because of the conscious strategic intent to collectively brand UK higher education and the concentration of financial and administrative resources that have been deployed to achieve a centrally directed vision of higher education.

The first British initiative was reportedly the first worldwide and arguably significant as it has since been emulated by other countries (BC 2003). An analysis of the key components deployed in branding UK higher education as a national system to shape and increase demand from prospective international students is therefore of great scholarly and policy interest. The concept of a *national brand for the higher education sector* as a whole, or a 'national HE brand' is little explored in the literature. There is a substantial body of work on the concept of the nation brand (e.g. Olins 2002; Van Ham 2002; Khamis 2012; Pamment 2014) through which key elements of national identity and culture are deployed to construct a narrative that attracts tourism, investment, and boosts exports in the interests of increasing global competitiveness (Szondi 2007; Kaneva and Popescu 2011).

The literature on the branding of HE institutions is also growing (e.g. Wæraas and Solbakk 2009; Chapleo 2010; Naidoo et al. 2014). Empirical research on institutional HE branding has explored the internal dynamics (Wæraas and Solbakk 2009), leadership and branding (Naidoo et al. 2014), achieving successful HE brands (Chapleo 2010), and brand communication on websites (Huisman 2007; Mampaey, Huisman, and Seeber 2015). However, little work has been done on higher education as a national brand, particularly in the context of the UK. Important exceptions include Sidhu (2002), who addresses the British Council campaign from a post-colonial perspective by examining brochures which is extended in Sidhu and Dall’Alba (2012). Branding has also been shown to influence students’ application letters (Hemsley-Brown 2012). Findlay (2011) likewise shows how policy, including international education marketing activities, influences student mobility by creating a supply of international education. Institutionally, branding higher education is already a complex endeavour, involving different styles and multiple stakeholders (Huisman and Mampaey 2014), while on a national level this complexity is exponentially increased.

While we draw on insights from these studies, none focus on how national higher education brands are constructed through connecting particular representations of prospective students with specific representations of the nation and the higher education sector, which combine to develop brand promises linked to positional competition and advantage. We thus extend this small body of work significantly by developing an analysis of how nation branding and higher education sector branding interact to construct: particular social and educational identities for potential student-consumers; higher education as a commodity; the higher education sector as unified; and the nation defined by historic icons. In these constructions, specific attributes are valued, while others are rendered invisible. We explain these representations and choices in the conceptual language of Pierre Bourdieu as ‘capitals’ (Bourdieu 1984).

We begin by presenting a conceptual framework to understand the connections between nation branding and national higher education branding. This links the concept of the entrepreneurial/competitive state under neo-liberalism to the positioning of higher education as a global commodity in the context of the knowledge economy which generates various forms of capital linked to positional competition. We then present the context and public rationales for the two major initiatives in the branding of UK higher education. In the next section, we present our analysis of how the national brand of British higher education was constructed in relation to the positioning of students and the positioning and brand messages related to the higher education sector.

### **Branding, the competition state and the global field of higher education**

Nation branding has come to prominence in the context of countries and regions competing for economic dominance and political influence in the largely neo-liberal global arena. The British state may also be thought of as exhibiting the characteristics of what Cerny (1990) has termed the ‘competition’ state. The competition state defines its primary objective as one of fostering a competitive national economy. Policies are shaped to promote, control and maximize returns from international market forces, abandoning some core discourses and functions of the welfare state. There is thus increasing articulation between the state and the market. Such competition states are likely to succeed internationally when they foster the favourable combination of four key attributes, Porter (1990) contends in his Diamond model for national competitive advantage, together with strategies of clustering ‘companies and institutions in a

particular field' (Porter 1998, 78). These four attributes, or determinants of competitive advantage, represented as a diamond are: production factor conditions; related and supporting industries; firm strategy, structure and rivalry and demand. National advantage tends to result from all four attributes being present and operating interdependently, leading to self-reinforcing conditions of competitiveness.

For the state to transform itself from civil association to enterprise, it needs to combine the obligations of citizenship with the responsibilities and risks of the entrepreneur (Volcic and Andrejevic 2011). Nation branding largely conceptualizes countries as entities for selling goods and services, mobilizing citizens in this endeavour. In other words, the aim of the nation brand is to create a corporate identity for the country to generate economic value (Leonard 1997). A strong cultural identity is a key component of a nation brand, as it is seen to generate soft power and influence in a model of cultural diplomacy (Nye 2004; Holden 2013). Cultural resources (heritage, creative products such as music and television, national symbols, tourist attractions, and so on) attract people to the nation, whether physically or emotionally, gradually contributing to an increase in political and diplomatic influence (Nye 2004). Higher education too has been transformed. Higher education has been conceptually transformed from a social and cultural project linked to the 'public good' to an industry for enhancing national competitiveness and as a lucrative service to sell in the global marketplace. These transitions in the nation state and higher education lead to the anchoring of the branding of higher education within the branding of the nation state.

In the case of the UK, increasing global competition around both the capitalization of knowledge and the increasing competition for international students has led to the perceived need to create brand awareness, unique competitive identity and to attract attention for recruitment. In this sense the brand has become a new tool for positional advantage in the competition between national higher education systems. It can be characterized as a strategic asset (Naidoo et al. 2014) capable of bringing together core national and higher education system attributes and values in order to create brand awareness, distinction and to attract student- consumer preferences. It also draws on a cluster of education-related industries, wherein English language teaching and testing, education technology, publishing, research and innovation form mutual rivalries and supply each other, generating a competitive advantage by their intersection (Porter 1990, 1998). Since brands work by differentiating themselves from other brands, symbolic strategies, such as integrating with cultural signs, and developing associations in the minds of the customer, become critical.

Brand promises in higher education encompass quality but more specifically in order to create real distinction, branding initiatives have to promise the acquisition of various types of resources which create the platform for aspirational identities to project and which give positional advantage (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2008) to graduates. In order to understand these relationships analytically and conceptually, we draw on Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of fields and capital. According to Bourdieu, social formations are structured around a complex ensemble of social fields in which various forms of power circulate. The activities in the field revolve around the acquisition and development of different species of capital, particular resources that are invested with value (Bourdieu 1984) which he classifies as economic, social and cultural. In a knowledge-based economy, the most important form of capital, and that which generates wealth and growth, is considered to be knowledge (Olssen and Peters 2005). Thus workers are rewarded in proportion to their possession of human capital, their knowledge and skills (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2008). Knowledge is

signified by higher education degrees (educational capital) which function as positional goods offering some graduates higher status and more opportunities in globally competitive higher education and labour market fields (Marginson 2006, 3). Because international higher education is itself a differentiated field with unequal allocation of capital (Marginson 2008), not all degrees confer the same educational capital.

Educational capital, leading to positional power, depends on the prestige of the qualification (Bourdieu 1984), which in turn depends on the reputation of the institution (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2008) and the reputation of the country. Institutional reputation is being critically impacted by international reputation (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002; Hazelkorn 2011; Kim 2011; Findlay et al. 2012). Symbolic capital, the perception and meanings accorded to a particular qualification and institution (Bourdieu 1984; Thurlow and Jaworski 2006), impacts reputation, which determines the capacity to attract international students, in turn impacting institutional resources and success (Naidoo 2003; Marginson 2006). Therefore, institutions build their brand to actively manage their reputation and enhance their symbolic capital (Wæraas and Solbakk 2009; Chapleo 2010; Naidoo et al. 2014). Brand signifiers such as logos, buildings, (Naidoo et al. 2014), promotional materials (Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana 2007), and even institutional re-identification (Wæraas and Solbakk 2009) are used to do so.

Similar dynamics can be observed on national levels. As institutional reputation impacts student choice, so does national reputation. Indeed, Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) demonstrate that most students decide on a particular host country prior to choosing an institution. This choice depends on knowledge of the country and the 'destination's reputation for quality' (Mazzarol and Soutar (2002, 83). The global importance of English is also key (Marginson 2006), which contributes to the dominance of the USA, UK and Australia in international student recruitment. In the next section we present the context and rationales for the branding initiatives before presenting our analysis of how these initiatives sought to shape and increase demand for British education by positioning HEIs and the sector in such a way as to promise the acquisition of various types of capital which create positional advantage for students as well as providing a platform for the construction of social identities, relationships, and lifestyles. At the same time, we show how the brand also promises a transfer of economic capital to institutions and economic and symbolic capital to the country as a whole. Thus, branding is a key mechanism for the acquisition and exchange of capitals within the UK's Knowledge Economy.

## The study

These findings result from an analysis of a database of texts on policy on international students comprising over 100 publicly available documents, originating between 1999 and 2014. These documents were identified by keyword searches (e.g. 'international students', 'overseas students' and 'foreign students') for policy relating to international students on The National Web Archives, British Council website, the central government website. Broader searches (through academic databases and Google) were attempted but proved redundant or unfruitful. Where references to further relevant documents were made in texts located via keyword searching, these original documents were located by full title searches. Each of the documents was coded inductively for themes, supported by NVivo. Sections relevant to international student policy were coded line by line, using *en vivo* naming principles (Saldana 2009). These codes



were checked individually during ‘second order’ or conceptual coding, when duplicate codes were also merged and a thematic structure was developed. One such theme was the importance of branding UK higher education. Supplementary documents were then identified which related particularly to branding, such as promotional websites, news articles and social networking sites. The thematic structure revealed the importance of themes such as reputation, quality and student perceptions of UK HE as well as it exposed the brand’s components being the international student, the HE sector and finally the nation (Figure 1).

### **‘Education UK’ 1999–2014:– an overview of the emergence and development of a brand**

This section presents our content analysis of primary documents relating to the creation and development of the national UK higher education brand. Within this brand, there are distinct, if interrelated, institutional and collective brands such as Oxbridge and the Russell Group. This paper, however, focuses primarily on the national brand.

#### ***Emergence***

The concept of a brand for UK higher education for overseas marketing and recruitment first emerged in 1999, with the launch of Tony Blair’s PMI (Blair 1999). The aim was to benefit the UK nationally, as well as the HE sector. Recruitment targets of 50,000 more students in HE and 25,000 in FE were set for 2006 (BC 2003). This initiative was reportedly the first of its kind worldwide (BC 2003). Its aim was to make ‘British Education the first choice for quality’ (BCECS 1999, 18), for international students. ‘Unco-ordinated’ institutions (BCECS 2000) were said to be in need of a brand as a symbolic rallying point, ‘positioning UK plc internationally’ (BC n.d.). The use of the word ‘positioning’ shows that strategic and competitive advantages were important considerations. The brand itself was intended, according to the British Council Education

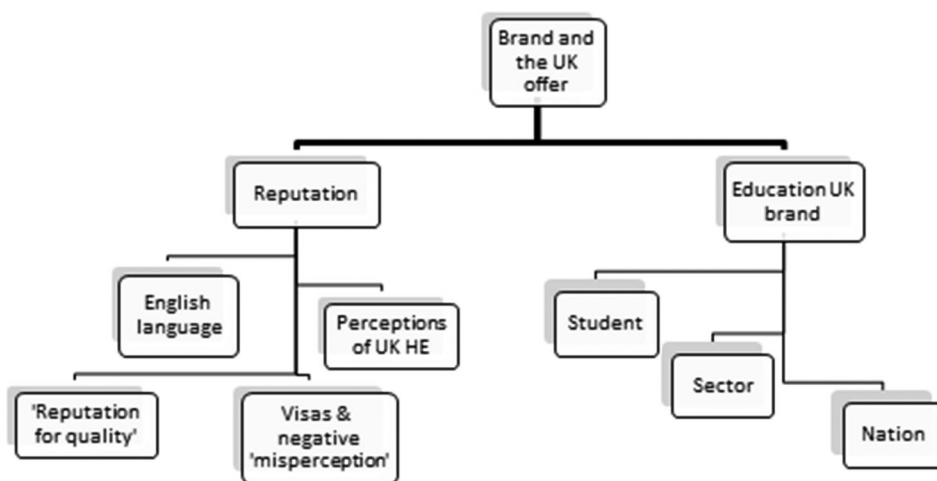


Figure 1. Illustration of thematic structure.



Counselling Service (BCECS) (2000, 16), to ‘develop and market a world-beating brand for British education’.

The Education UK brand was centrally funded by the PMI, based on market research known as the Brand Report (BC 1999). This sought to establish perceptions of UK HE in comparison with its ‘competitors’, especially Australia and the USA, and concluded that the UK was seen as elite and high quality, but also as expensive, less friendly than Australia, and less innovative than the USA. The branding initiatives sought to counteract these perceptions through marketing activities, such as alumni campaigns; promotional activities (e.g. education fairs, searchable database of UK programmes); professional development and certification for education agents; changes to institutional marketing and recruitment practices; development of new courses and programmes led by marketing; and student award programmes like the Real UK campaign and the Shine! Award (BC 2011).

Re-branding took place from 2006 in the PMI2, known as ‘the Initiative for International Education’, to focus more on promoting the value of UK qualifications, the quality of student experience, increasing collaboration through partnerships with overseas governments, diversifying markets (DIUS 2009) and encouraging the involvement of students and alumni (BC 2010). This was to respond to ‘brand weaknesses’ identified by participants from UK HEIs and overseas agents. Competitor countries were reportedly imitating the Education UK endeavour, and students (customers) were said to be more ‘demanding and discriminating’ with a particular focus on careers (BC 2003). The focus on recruitment had apparently encouraged a short-term approach to financial gain with less focus on ‘the longer-term objectives’ (BC 2003, 17). In addition to marketing activities, the PMI2 sought to change ‘the international student experience’, on the understanding that reputational gains would thereby ensue. These included project funds for initiatives to improve the quality of experience in academic life, accommodation, lifestyle, careers and employability (UKCISA 2010). It also facilitated visa processes, relaxed restrictions on work during study and increased scholarship opportunities (Blair 2006).

### *Re-positioning*

Under the Coalition Government elected in 2010, the Education UK brand was subsumed under broader ‘Britain is GREAT’ campaign. Launched in 2011 to promote trade and investment in the UK, it aims ‘to help the world discover why Britain is such a great place to visit, study, work, invest and do business’ (Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2011). Led by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, it involves the UK Trade and Investment department, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Visit Britain (the tourism agency) and Education UK under the British Council under one umbrella brand, defined by one key adjective: GREAT (Cabinet Office 2013). Heavily reliant on the symbolism of the flag, the campaign is primarily visual. For instance, a poster from the ‘Knowledge is GREAT Britain’ pillar of the campaign links the Union Jack with Cambridge and with the rest of the UK. Posters employ powerful visual symbols and instantly recognizable historical or current icons of the UK (DCMS 2011). Pamment (2014) argues that, in conjunction with the 2012 Olympic opening ceremony, this constructs a theatrical, mythical narrative. Our textual analysis confirms that those aspects related to higher education appear to be referencing iconic imagery in the development of a symbolic narrative.

In the International Education Strategy (IES) (BIS 2013a), the GREAT Britain campaign is described as the ‘overarching vehicle to promote UK education overseas’ (57). It showcases an already extant strong national brand (The House of Lords 2014, 61), rather than creating one. The residual strength of British higher education is therefore presupposed, persuasively promoting this view by establishing it as common ground with the reader (Saarinen 2008). The Education UK brand still exists as one aspect of the GREAT campaign (BIS 2013a). However, the GREAT campaign has a strong economic focus, greater emphasis on TNE and collaborative partnerships, and less on direct international recruitment and student experiences; it is almost exclusively a promotional campaign, in contrast to some of the PMI-sponsored projects which actually engaged with students and institutions. The campaign took effect in a context of an increasingly heated debate on migration in the UK, implicating students who are formally classified as immigrants in line with international reporting norms (Home Affairs Committee 2011). The IES (BIS 2013a, 2013b) responds to this debate by emphasizing a binary distinction between ‘genuine’ and ‘bogus students’, where the latter are considered to abuse the visa system, and the absence of a ‘cap’ on students despite the overall target of reducing net migration to ‘the tens of thousands’ (Cameron 2013; Home Office 2013a). Both the Education UK and the Britain is GREAT brands were argued to be successful, the former on the basis of increased student numbers, surpassing its targets by 10,000 (BC 2003), and the latter on the basis of increased revenue – over £500 million was claimed in income for an investment of £37 million (House of Lords 2014, 614). Other measures of this putative success were high levels of awareness of the brand among potential students, close reflection of the values of the brand among students, and positive institutional responses (BC 2003). In the first stages of the brand development, the UK suffered by comparison with the USA in terms of employability. By 2010, awareness of the brand was high, at over 70% of those surveyed, as were positive perceptions of both the value of a UK qualification and the experience of studying (DTZ 2011). All of these are claimed to result in a strengthened international education sector (BIS 2013a). Other accounts, however, highlight reductions in demands from particular countries, namely India, which cast shadows on this unilaterally positive depiction (Marginson 2014; UUK 2014).

So over the last 15 years, UK higher education has been branded in several different iterations. In the following sections, we draw on our documentary analysis to present our examination of these branding initiatives. In particular we explore: how UK HE is branded as a product, and how in the course of this branding, students, the sector and the nation are also branded while students become potential recipients of promises of capitals. The Education UK brand represents an attempt to control and capitalize on the UK’s reputation for higher education, and does so by defining the key characteristics of UK HE. This involves defining also students, the sector and the nation as beneficiaries of the brand, with consequences of those constructions and representations.

The following section presents our analysis of key branding themes and its consequences, uniting primary documentary analysis with the academic literature.

### **Branding UK higher education as a quality product**

The first brand concept developed under the PMI as logo and strap line is ‘Educ@tion UK’: innovative, individual, inspirational’ (BC 1999). This attempted to develop a distinctive national educational identity for competition, highlighting key dimensions, namely modernity, personalization and motivating learning. Under the ‘Britain is

GREAT' campaign, education is more simply defined as 'GREAT', and visually represents students in iconic historical locations such as Oxford and Cambridge, in classic academic settings such as laboratory work and libraries. Education here is represented as elite, traditional and serious.

Quality is used in the Education UK brand to develop reputational and economic capital. The UK's reputation for high quality education, 'quality beyond dispute' (BCECS 1999), is considered a key strength, such that 'Our universities, colleges, awarding organizations and schools are recognized globally for their excellence' (BIS 2013a, 3). The UK's attraction for international students is presented as depending on its reputation for 'the quality and value of the education' (BIS 2011a). Students agreed that 'UK education is the best in the world', describing UK education as 'full of possibilities' (Ipsos MORI 2006, 33). Analysis of the Brand Report shows that educational excellence was seen as a 'tired concept that needs re-imagining' (BCECS 1999), so the concept of quality was expanded to include student experience, welcome and 'livability'. This focused on being 'alive with possibilities' and 'responsive' (BCECS 1999) in contrast to earlier perceptions of hidebound traditions. This emphasis on student experience is strategic, so that publicity in the form of alumni recommendations are thought to result from positive student experiences (BIS 2013b), as positive experiences will lead to free publicity.

A new understanding of how reputation is formed emerged through the textual analysis of the conceptions of, and emphasis on, student experience. A PMI document states that:

Reputation is no longer defined by dreaming spires, cool culture or historical brilliance, nor research that has changed the world. *The UK's reputation for international education is defined by what students experience* – and what they say to others – this year, each year, in real time. (Archer, Davison, and Cheng 2010, 2 emphasis added)

Student experience is represented to be based on relationships between learners and teachers (BIS 2013b), so the PMI2 funded projects, such as the *Teaching International Students* project (Ryan 2010), to improve 'the international student experience'. This is seen to strengthen the brand by encouraging institutions to develop an 'innovative study experience' (BC 2010, 11). It also highlighted the 'uniquely cosmopolitan student body' and emphasizes the 'intercultural benefits' (BIS 2013b, 57) of a multicultural mix of students.

The reputation for excellence in teaching and learning reduces the uncertainty in graduate recruitment and therefore enhances employability, deemed to be a key factor in improving quality. The brand emphasizes 'the new world class' of alumni as 'alive with possibilities' (BCECS 1999). Employability is a key message to communicate overseas: 'that students with a UK qualification have the necessary skills that employers are seeking' (BC 2003, 23). The PMI funded resources to develop country-specific guidance on employability (BC 2010) and international job clubs (UKCISA 2010), which generated anticipations of a high 'return on investment, value and employability of a UK education' (BC 2010, 13). Creating a perception that higher education in the UK is associated with increased employability enhances the educational capital of its graduates, as communicating the message overseas, increases their perceived value to employers. Consequently, the brand generates real educational capital, by promoting the UK's 'excellence' without necessarily altering its content.

To represent quality and symbolize cultural capital, the brand focuses on the most renowned and prestigious institutions rather than the diversity of HEIs. As many writers have observed, rather than accommodating the plurality of voices, experiences and competing visions, brands function in a highly reductionist and hierarchical manner, which we see here in reducing representations of quality higher education to elite institutions. Sidhu and Dall’Alba (2012, 421) state that Oxford and Cambridge were used as ‘guiding icons of British educational excellence’ from the outset of the PMI. Our analysis confirms this interpretation, as the ‘Britain is GREAT’ campaign also foregrounds Oxbridge as representative of the entire sector (BIS 2013a; BC 2015). In key images, students can be seen in the Brasenose College library, and in a research laboratory at Corpus Christi College (BC 2015). The IES positions elite institutions as affecting the reputation of the entire sector: ‘UK universities and colleges gain hugely from the international reputation of institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge, or specialist arts or technical colleges like the Royal College of Music’ (BIS 2013a, 25). The brand therefore uses these institutions as touchstones to ‘enhance the quality and reputation of UK education’ (BIS 2013a, 34) to compete in the international education marketplace, because they convey internationally recognized and legitimate quality. They have significant symbolic capital, facilitating the conversion of the educational capital in their graduates to economic capital through higher salaries and higher status. The legitimate value associated with Oxbridge in part transfers to less well known UK institutions, because the latter are positioned as part of a system represented by the former. Using those institutions to leverage the entire sector may be interpreted as deploying their symbolic capital in the service of UK HE as whole, promising potential student consumers significant advantage in positional competition.

So, analysis of the primary documents suggests that the brand highlights the quality of teaching, experience, and by traditionally well-known institutions. In doing so, it fixes meanings about higher education as a product as an elite, high-quality commodity which confers labour market advantage and social status. This approach deploys symbolic capital to generate reputational and economic capitals, and also makes certain promises for the beneficiaries of the brand, namely the students, the sector and the nation.

### **The consequences and promises of the national brand**

In the previous section, the branding of UK HE as a product was analysed in terms of the capitals it draws on and promises to generate. By describing students, the sector and the nation in particular ways, these components of the brand necessarily have discursive and potential material consequences. Firstly, analysis of the documents reveals a representation of the ideal student, engaged in the generation of their own educational and cultural capitals (Naidoo and Williams 2015), which the brand promises to deliver. Secondly, the sector is branded as a unified and coherent whole, which is encouraged in the amassing of economic capital. This also benefits the country, which is also branded by in the national HE brand. Finally, the brand promises to generate political capital for the nation.

### **International students: promises of cultural, educational and economic capital**

The Education UK brand, as a constellation of cues and symbols, acts as a resource for the construction of identities and social status. In describing its target audience, it sets

expectations for international students in terms of their behaviour, aspirations and status. The brand influences how students think about and describe their relationship to UK HE (Hemsley-Brown 2012), and consequently the way that the brand represents them is important. They are described as ‘tomorrow’s world citizens’ (BCECS 1999), ambitious young people, who want to learn in English because it is a ‘passport to intellectual citizenship of the world’, and in part are doing so to fulfil the expectations of their family and community. Under the main umbrella brand of the GREAT campaign, Education UK continues to use student case studies, highlighting their exceptionalism and ambition (BC 2015).

Firstly, educational capital is referenced in repetitions of the phrase ‘the new world class’ (BCECS 1999) in the desired brand footprint. It suggests to potential students that the ‘old world order’ which is typically associated with UK higher education is shifting, but that UK higher education still provides a ‘passport to intellectual citizenship’ of this new world class. The phrase evokes a sense of elitism and superiority, implying membership in an exclusive club with extensive benefits (Thurlow and Jaworski 2006). In Tony Blair’s words, British education is ‘a first class ticket for life’ (Blair 1999, 2). These advantages are explicitly set out as ‘the range of social, cultural and career advantages that a UK education offers’ (BC 2010, 13). The implication is that a British education offers an increase in educational capital for students, embodied in university degrees.

Aspirations and ambitions are the key to the ideal international student. The ‘core desire of the conceptual target’ is given as ‘to know I have taken ownership of my future in the best way’ (BCECS 1999). This implies that UK higher education is definitively ‘the best way’ for students to take control of their futures, and also silences social and economic factors outside the students’ control. The self-reliance of the individual is an important assumption of neo-liberal discourses (Fairclough 2001, 187). Peters (2001) and Papatsiba (2009) note that responsibilizing the individual for investing in one’s own education, equipping oneself with personal skills and developing enterprise is part of the intensified moral regulation promoted via neoliberal welfare and educational policies, especially those relating to international education and student mobility. There is an expectation of ambition from students – (a) British education is best able to serve my ambition to be the best’ (BCECS 1999). In the GREAT campaign, for instance, individual students are visually placed in traditional learning contexts of libraries and laboratories, highlighting their drive and motivation. These ambitions are embedded primarily in careers, a return on family investment, rather than in personal fulfilment or non-economic objectives, highlighted later in a BIS report: ‘many (international students) have *returned to their home countries* as UK alumni to achieve *successful careers and highly prestigious positions*’ (BIS 2013b, 15, emphasis ours). These are promises of capitals, of potential returns on private investments in international education, likely to appeal to aspiring and strategic middle classes in countries with large pools of students envisaging study abroad. By enhancing employability, as described above, the brand offers a real boost to educational capital among international alumni.

The brand also incorporates dimensions of social and cultural capital, by branding the ‘student experience’, as highlighted above. International students are expected to be interested in acquiring ‘rich life experience’ (BC 2010), in ‘music, pubs (and) facilities’ and in ‘integration into student life’ (BCECS 1999), all of which generate cultural and social capital. They are believed to value diversity to desire cross-cultural experiences of British life (BCECS 1999). Modern global cultural capital, the non-academic

knowledge, tastes and dispositions acquired outside the formal curriculum (Bourdieu 1984), involves a cosmopolitan orientation towards people of different origins and backgrounds (Weenink 2008). Multicultural educational experiences, in addition to fluent English, are desirable attributes for international graduates, as they increase the exchange value of credentials. ‘The Shine! Award’, for instance, highlights international students’ achievements, and judging criteria emphasize ‘the new life-skills and achievements they’ve acquired, not only from studying in the UK but also through living here and being part of the vibrancy of UK life’ (BC 2011, 2). It also includes ‘how the student is enthusiastically making the most of their time here’ and offers volunteering or work experience as examples. Networks forged in an internationalized HE environment constitute social, as well as cultural capital, realizable through information exchange and future relationships, whose currency could be useful in a globalized job market.

The Education UK brand therefore generates a set of desirable voices, behaviours, attitudes and narratives, forming a picture of the branded, desirable student: exceptional, motivated, ambitious and engaged in the community. However, this only applies to ‘genuine students’ defined in visa requirements as those who have sufficient economic capital, traditional educational qualifications, a defined level of English language, an offer to study at a reputable HEI (Home Office 2011), and the capacity to ‘contribute to our society’ (Home Office 2013b). It promises to enhance their capitals – social, cultural and educational – through UK HE. Students are thus beneficiaries of an effective national brand for UK HE.

### **Consequences for the sector: the promise of economic capital for all HEIs**

In addition to creating an idealized international student, the brand creates an idealized vision of the sector. Branding the UK HE sector is in effect a double play: a particular construct of the sector is developed based on the specific characteristics and images of elite institutions, despite its internal stratification and institutional diversity, while representing the sector as coherent and unified. Findlay’s (2011) analysis suggests that national policy, expressed through marketing initiatives, creates the supply of higher education which significantly shapes ISM. Our textual analysis confirms that the aim of the brand was not simply to meet a pre-existing demand but actually generate it: the education brand, according to the BCECS (2000, 16), is intended to ‘create the demand from international students *to satisfy member institution needs*’ (emphasis ours). The brand is developed in service to the sector’s implied need for the income generated from international students. The importance of the cohesiveness of the sector is also stressed: ‘the whole has to become more than the sum of its parts’ (BCECS 1999). It also suggests that the brand has the capacity to influence institutions and the sector more widely, and may be seen therefore as an extension of state control over the higher education sector.

Institutions and the sector are encouraged to participate in international education in marketized ways, to gain income. The PMI was launched a year after the initial introduction of flat domestic fees for home students in 1998, which increased to £3000 at the time of reporting an apparent ‘success’ in international recruitment (Hubble and Knott 2004). Uncertainty about higher education funding domestically could be argued to increase the attractiveness of an international source of revenue, now a mainstay of the sector (UUK 2014). This is a major theme in the policy, and is often openly acknowledged (Blair 1999; BC 2000; Blair 2006; BIS 2013a). In a context of



reduced funding for HE institutions (De Vita and Case 2003), these branding efforts have ideological consequences, as they encourage institutions to seek funding from international sources (i.e. students); to seek economic capital. One of the key aims expressed in the Brand Report (BCES 1999) was to redress the low levels of market orientation and expertise among institutions, with limited strategic ‘vision’ in the sector, actively seeking to change institutional and sector behaviour. The Coalition IES is very clear about the value of UK higher education as an ‘export industry’ (BIS 2011b), bringing in significant income, not only through tuition fees, but also through partnerships and TNE. The brand is seen to generate income for institutions and the country, simultaneously encouraging market-led behaviour from institutions and the sector.

Certain branding tactics and decisions may further impact the autonomy of the sector. By mediating access to international markets through promotional budgets and education fairs (BC 2003), the Education UK brand has a certain power to privilege some parts of the sector, enhancing the market pressures in the interaction between institutions, state and market (Filippakou, Salter, and Tapper 2012). As described above, the brand foregrounds elite institutions like Oxbridge, valuing their characteristics over those of other institutions. This discursive power to set the agenda for international education may exert a coercive effect. For instance, where previously institutions organized relationships with education agents individually, the Education UK brand created an education agents’ strategy to ‘increase the number, effectiveness and quality of agents’, setting up a database and mediating links between agents and institutions (BC 2003, 16). Many institutions, especially those with limited resources, will therefore rely on a centrally funded body for support with their recruitment. Similarly, when a target was set to ‘double the number of countries sending more than 10,000 students p.a. to the UK’ (DIUS 2009), the sector was encouraged to modify its recruitment strategy, along particular policy lines set by the Government, rather than by the sector itself (Dill 1997; Jackson 1997). The Coalition IES also emphasizes ‘high-value opportunities’ in the form of government-to-government partnerships (BIS 2013c), like a £75 million contract for a vocational training college in Saudi Arabia (BIS 2013a, 58). Given the financial scale of these projects, this suggests that a significant disciplinary power may be exerted over the sector, not through direct funding arrangements, but through privileged access by some institutions or groups of institutions to particular opportunities. Therefore, the development of a national brand for higher education could be another way for the state to encourage and incentivize particular institutional behaviours, which intensify governmental control and regulation.

As a tool for creating economic capital, the brand also has the potential to exert disciplinary power on the sector, by demonstrating that economic income is the primary indicator of value in international educational activities. The income generated by the brand and its associated marketing activities is thought to benefit the sector. However, its main task is to generate income for the nation.

### **Consequences for the nation: promises of political capital**

In the course of promoting the Education UK brand, the nation itself was also branded. By representing higher education through symbolic characteristics of the nation, a relationship of reclaimed ownership over higher education by the state is established. The brand is seen as a mechanism to sustain national competitive advantage: ‘representation of the UK as a study destination remains a central and integral role to the country



and institutions' competitive position' (DTZ 2011, 54). The nation is seen to be competing in a global marketplace with other destination countries, so that the image of the country takes primacy over the images of the individual institutions, which become *UK national* HEIs above any other attribute. Income, or economic capital, is the primary indicator of success in the marketplace, and therefore the brand set out to build 'a strong national brand built around the UK's reputation as a safe and exciting place to study, offering a rich life experience and enhanced career prospects' (BC 2010). This is based on its perception as creative, social, safe, cultured and accessible, rather than its 'misperception' as unfriendly, expensive and with bad food (BCECS 1999). By associating national monuments with abstract concepts of 'knowledge', 'innovation' and 'heritage', the latter iteration of the brand under the GREAT campaign seeks to leverage its symbolic resources (Pamment 2014). For example, it emphasizes 'global names such as the BBC, the Science Museum and the Premier League' (BIS 2013a, 5) to trade on Britain's established symbolic capital to generate economic capital.

The brand is also seen to generate, as well as draw on, symbolic capital: 'engagement in international education, both in the UK and via TNE, enhances the reputation and brand recognition of UK institutions and helps project the UK's soft power' (BIS 2013b, 6). The concept of soft power refers to the ability to influence, attract and persuade others without military capacity, through culture, values or foreign policy (Nye 2004). By enhancing the UK's reputation, the IES argues that the Education UK brand helps to foster the UK's influence abroad (BIS 2013b). The political nature of the brand surfaces in the first PMI speech where Blair argued that

People who are educated here have a lasting tie to our country. They promote Britain around the world, helping our trade and our diplomacy. It is easier for our executives and our diplomats to do business with people familiar with Britain. (Blair 1999)

In addition to the economic role of alumni as professionals in the global marketplace, this approach to international education reveals enduring political rationales attached to student mobility. These relate to public diplomacy and to expectations of students who, seen as young ambassadors growing sympathetic to the economic and political interests of the country where they studied, assume a role of representation and connection between countries (Papatsiba 2005; Rizvi 2011).

Thus, the nation is a beneficiary of the Education UK and Britain is GREAT brands which generate economic and symbolic capital transferrable to the country as a whole, beyond the education sector. These brands show that what is valued in higher education and the UK as a nation is its heritage, creativity, society and innovation, to the extent that these help to generate soft power.

In sum, the national brand for higher education relies on, but is not coterminous with, the nation brand. Similarly both the nation brand and the national HE brand are significantly impacted by the UK's reputation. However, both brands represent the intentional positioning of the nation, whereas the reputation is at least partly outside this control. National symbols, cultural icons, national brands and English language are the pillars on which the nation brand rests, and impact the national HE brand as well. For example, a reputation for quality developed on the strength of products such as fashion and accessories like Burberry creates an expectation that higher education is also supposed to be a product of a similar quality. The national HE brand relies on perceptions of elite institutions, a reputation for quality particularly around teaching and learning, on positive student experiences which generate recommendations,

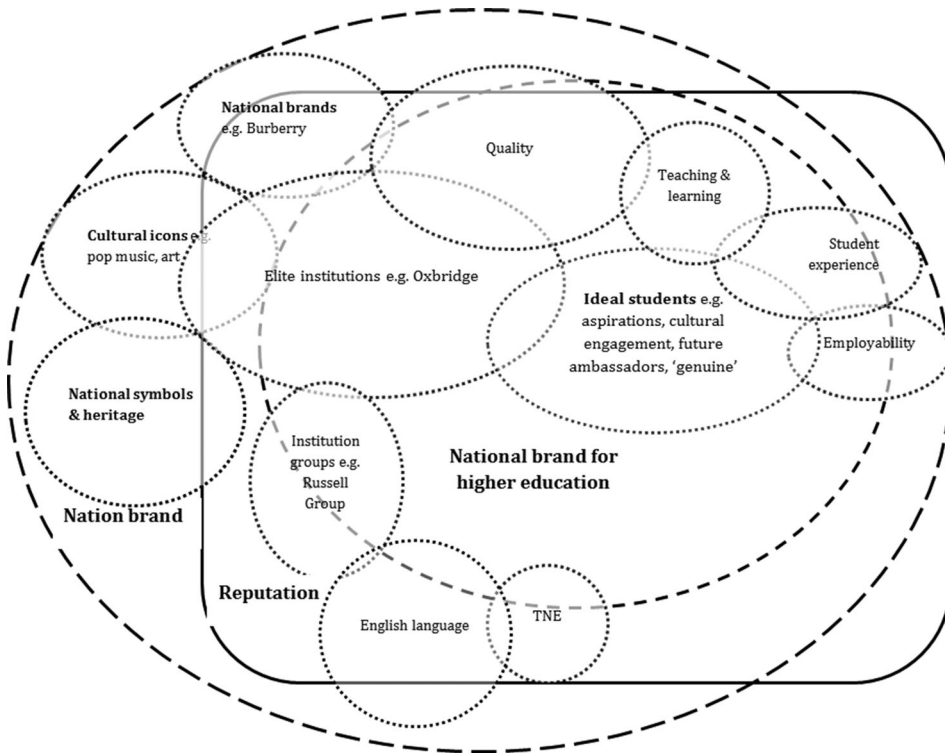


Figure 2. Brand components.

and on high employability rates. It seeks to construct a representation of an ideal student, as discussed above. To a lesser extent, the national HE brand also incorporates institution groups and TNE. Thus the national brand for HE cannot substantially deviate from the overall nation brand or the national reputation; however, it can privilege certain components and diminish others to foster a more attractive, competitive image (Figure 2).

## Conclusion

This paper has explored the emergence and development of a national brand for UK higher education, from the initial Education UK brand developed under the PMI to the new iteration of the Education UK under the 'Britain is GREAT' campaign, covering the period from 1999 to 2014. In a context of reduced funding for UK higher education, changing attitudes to public and private financing of higher education in different parts of the world, and increased competition in the international student market, the brand takes on increasing importance. While both nation branding and institutional higher education branding have been largely discussed in the literature, there is paucity of research on national higher education brands as an emerging phenomenon.

Based on the thematic analysis of policy documents relevant to international students, the national brand was found to generate a set of particular characteristics for higher education as a commodity, emphasizing iconic elite institutions like Oxbridge and positive experiences to symbolize high-quality education. Perceived quality

generated by the brand promises reputational and economic capital for the sector by increasing recruitment, and enhancing educational capital for students by influencing perceptions in graduate labour markets. By fixing these meanings of higher education as a product, the brand has implications for students, the sector and the nation. A national brand for higher education acts as a resource for the construction of identity, behaviour and social status of international students. Framing students as ‘ambitious’, ‘world class’, ‘enthusiastic’, motivated, invested in prestige and success in the terms of the marketplace, it promises to augment their educational, cultural and eventually economic capital. On a sector level, it encourages institutions to behave in particular marketized ways, namely income-generating activities. The national brand for higher education also represents a branding of the nation, which takes primacy over institutions, while drawing on higher education for the generation of soft power. So the UK is being marketed overseas in terms of its culture and heritage, which is read back to its higher education. Meanwhile, institutions and students are made promises of economic, social and cultural capitals to be gained through participation in UK higher education, while both also augment the UK’s economic, political and cultural capital.

Furthermore, this study significantly expands the scholarship of branding by conceptualizing the national brand as a strategic expression of the Competitive State. It positions higher education as a global commodity in the context of the knowledge economy through which various forms of capital linked to positional competition are signified and generated. This has implications for various HE constituencies and actors.

A brand is only the shell of a conceptual constellation of values, assumptions and logics. It is therefore tempting to dismiss national sector brands as irrelevant to institutional or classroom experiences, but this article suggests that it is possible that the effects of the brand may be felt outside international offices and recruitment agencies. Accepting and using a national sector brand implies acceptance of its values and assumptions about students, institutions, the sector and the country. A critical awareness of the content and substance of the branding depicted here offers a tool for analysis, and informed engagement or resistance.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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