Challenges and Marketing Strategies for Young African Universities

Dr. George Stanley Kinyata[1], Prof. Kaaya Siraje[2*]

[1]*Senior Lecturer and Head of, Economics and Statistics Department, Kabale University, Uganda*

[2]*Professor of Business Leadership and Management, Deputy Vice Chancellor in Charge of Academics and Research, University of Technology and Arts of Byumba-Rwanda*

*****Corresponding Author:** *Prof. Kaaya Siraje, Professor of Business Leadership and Management, Deputy Vice Chancellor in Charge of Academics and Research, University of Technology and Arts of Byumba-Rwanda*

Abstract: *The article shows the challenges young Universities meet, particularly African Universities and also how they change their tactics to win these battles and to survive and flourish in the changing world. The Challenges shown in this article which many Universities have faced over the past four decades have resulted in important transformations in the scope of their mission, governance and relations with wider national, regional and global economics and societies. This article spells out these challenges, threats and strategies to continuously improve their programs, teaching, and provision of learning facilities and to find the right way to the Black Box of the consumer (students and other stakeholders). The article puts more emphases on marketing strategies of African Universities in their journey to excel generation and dissemination of relevant knowledge and skills development for lifelong learning and community service. The article shows how the education industry is facing lots of challenges and how marketing is the way that helps to reduce the costs of Education, increases the number of high achieving students and help Universities to boost their position in the Market, helps to elevate the brand and reputation.*

Lastly the article talks about the growth, the impact and importance of University rankings which is a key contemporary issue in strategic management of higher education. Rankings are highly based on research outcomes though there are more institutions worldwide which are not considered in these ranking criteria because they are more teaching oriented and concentrate on Arts and Social Sciences. Rankings are used either as performance Indicators or as tools for choosing places of study. These rankings should take into consideration of the establishment period of Universities. The article advises young Universities how to think globally to find the right way to global competition.

1. INTRODUCTION

There are very many universities across the world, which means that competition between higher education institutions is intense and every year, each of them is trying not just to recruit a big number of students, but also recruit the best creative brains (ie the top student talent). In order to survive and flourish, each university has an opportunity to win these battles. This opportunity is called marketing. Today as never before, higher education institutions focus on marketing strategies. Many of the best universities design their plans with the most prestigious marketing professionals and invest a lot of time and money to achieve a significant competitive advantage. The average amount spent on marketing strategies has increased by over 50% since 2000. The world is moving too fast, the changes that are occurring in different fields, including the higher education in global market, force universities to change their tactics , marketing plans , strategies, directions, improve education conditions, implement innovations, hire the best lecturers, adopt new technology and new programs studies.

2. CHALLENGES AND THREATS

Over the past three to four decades, universities have been faced with many challenges. These have resulted in significant transformations in the scope of their mission, governance, knowledge production and circulation and relations with wider national, regional and global economies and societies. (Barnett, 2009). These transformations are part of a wider `paradigmatic transition` facing all societies and universities, around the world (Santos, 2010).

According to Santos (2010), what confronts the modern university and what indeed places the modern university at cross roads is that it has tended to answer strong questions with weak answers. Robertson (2010) noted that weak answers are technical answers that focus on the problem as if it were disconnected from wider social and political phenomenon. Strong answers not only see the importance, and the enormity of the task at5 hand, but also see that it is our responsibility to map, make sense of, and advance an agenda that seeks to change the current state of affairs.

African universities, in their journey to excel in generation and dissemination of relevant knowledge and skills development for lifelong learning and community service currently face a number of challenges and threats that include:

- *Tuition fee review*: African universities have one of the lowest ranked university fees structure and yet there is possibility that changes to higher fees could affect the student numbers and cause resistance from the government because of a number of reasons including poverty and politics.

- *Attracting and retaining the best talent:* The most successful universities recognize the importance of a rich and diverse work force. This should bring together academics with the right disciplines and expertise, to create teams that will win more than their fair share of research income and attract the best junior academics and students . It has been established that payment of salaries and wages for the non-permanent academic staff usually delays for periods of up to 4 months. This greatly affects the university since it cannot retain talented scholars as result of pay delays. According to Akilagpa (2004), alternatives such as creating an environment in which academics can develop their practice and build their reputation and providing appropriate facilities that support research, publication and commercialization of intellectual property, should be explored.

- *Financial independence:* Many of the biggest pitfalls for universities are around the lack of reliable and long-term financial resources. This greatly affects research and publications and the quality of teaching. Also, the decisions made by the universities are likely to be affected by the funders and shortage of these resources.

- *Value of money*: This is something that universities will really need to address, including questions about how many hours students are taught, the quality of teaching and whether there are essential facilities. Issues concerning the qualifications of the academic staff are very important.

- *Finding an identity*: Universities remain an aspiration for families, a priority for a modern economy and major export business, their biggest challenge is to find a renewed sense pf purpose and to make a new contract with the public about how they can support one another.

- *Technology and digital trend:* Digital platforms are being used to innovate the teaching and learning experience, revolutionaliase research through the use of big data and artificial intelligence and to drive improved business operations against performance objectives. Some universities still have long journey in order to cope up with the digital world. The lecture rooms have no electrical sockets therefore if a well-wisher donated a projector to a class, it (the projector) would not be utilized! Additionally, the universities do not regularly update their on line data.

- *Competition:* Many universities are facing acute competition at regional, national and even international levels.

3. ADVERTISING STRATEGIES

In Uganda, when it comes to marketing strategies, young universities such as Kabale university should take into consideration 3 key questions:

- What to communicate

- Whom to communicate

- How to communicate.

In that case, the University is able to deliver consistent, clear, and authentic messages to their prospective students after a good analysis and evaluation to their potential.

3.1. What to Communicate?

It is important to find the key strength and emphasize them. The following 4 benefits tend to define and discern a university from others:

Selection of both students and staff: Gathering and attracting students and faculties that will strengthen and reinforce the school`s idea and purpose;

Knowledge: Both the specific type of knowledge /disciplines offered and the relative eminence or distinction of these knowledge/disciplines` level;

Certification: The ability to provide relevant and important training and certifications in technical and problem-solving skills as well as the particular degrees offered;

Immersion: The relative "university experience", whether that is on campus or through remote learning. Students and faculty feel a deeper connection to a school when they are immersed in its culture and ideals.

The role of African universities here is to understand which of the above benefits are their strengths and undertake efforts to forge the right message and promote it to the right audience. Besides this, the message must be close to the core values, brand, reputation, history of the university and of course positioning to make a difference. Combined, these elements can bring to higher education institutions a wider reach, more top student talent and elevate the performance of their brands.

3.2. To Whom to Communicate?

Marketing strategies start with knowing your audience and your market. It would seem that a message should be communicated only to the main target audience. In the case of a young university, the audience is formed by young people aged between 20 and 30 years though however, that is not the actual case. Even if students are the main target group and the main consumers of the services provided by the universities, there are a lot of groups that should be taken into consideration. All the universities` audience segments are important: undergraduate or graduate students, prospective or current students, parents, alumni, visitors, media, lecturers, examination developers. When delivering the messages and building a strategy everybody from this list should be taken into account. Stake holders are responsible for what is and what will be rumored about specific university. In advertising the universities` services, information should be disseminated to all the relevant segments as mentioned above.

3.3. How to Communicate?

We are in the digital century now. In the century where information flow is faster than the speed of light. Obviously, a lot has changed in the marketing world during last few years, but even so universities have two ways to promote and deliver their messages ie. using on line or off line channels. This can be achieved through:

Strategic social media: Today`s students have grown up communicating and sharing experiences on social media such as Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter. Using the power of different networks and engaging content, universities can use social media to attract students, interact faster with the current students and stay connected with alumni. Social media is the largest area of innovation and growth in higher education marketing. Many universities do not regularly post on its social media plat forms and this makes the followers idle.

Running a responsive website: If until now it was difficult for every university to simply set up a website. Google`s change of algorithms when showing results means that is now also important to design a responsive website with a good Search Engine Optimization (SEO) ranking.

Advertising: Even if the marketing trends show us that off line advertising will disappear step by step, universities still have the opportunity to promote and engage students through offline advertising such as banners, posters, universities` journals, and flyers. Outreach programs are also important.

Mobile development: Higher education institutions are making greater investments in having a mobile presence, from the institution's website to the development of mobile friendly course content.

Search engine optimization: for universities which offer slot programs, it is a must to ensure that these programs are in the top of search engine listings.

The education industry is facing a lot of challenges, but marketing is a way that can help it to adopt no matter what. With proper planning and strategies, marketing can shave the costs of education, increase the number of high-achieving students and help universities to boost their position in the market. Marketing strategies can also help to elevate the brand and reputation of the university, so that it may correctly position itself and subsequently defend this position. All that remains for a young universities is to do the best they can to continuously improve their programs, teaching, provision of learning facilities and to find the right way to the black box of the consumer (Students and other stake holders).

4. UNIVERSITY RANKING

According to Justas Nugaras & Romualdas Ginevicius (2005), the growth of impact and importance of various University Rankings is a key contemporary issue in strategic management of higher education, also highly related to the networking perspective of higher education institutions in several aspects. One of the aspects is that it uses a lot of internationalization and other network related results to compare institutions and secondly, ranking shift the portfolios of the university partners (Rauhvargers, 2013) not only for those universities listed in the rankings, but also for the non-listed institutions as newly ranked institutions become more selective (Olds & Robertson,2012). As rankings are highly based on the research outcomes, it should be noted that there are many good institutions worldwide that should be considered for partnerships, taking into account other aspects than position in the ranking criteria because they are more teaching-oriented or concentrate mainly on the arts and humanities (Rauhvargers, 2013)

The concept of ranking has gained great importance as tool for all stake holders of higher education land scape. These rankings, which can be used as tool to maintain and build institutional position and reputation, have also resulted in an increasing trend of policy makers utilizing the ranking results to make decisions on resource allocation or structure of the higher education systems (Chin-Heng Limm, Freddy Boey,2014). The rankings are used either as performance indicators or as tools for choosing places of study (Hazelkorn 2008,Marginson 2008). Though concerns about ranking methodologies have been raised, such as rankings being retrospective and not taking into consideration the establishment period of universities (saisana & D`Hombres 2008. Loobuyck 2009, Badat 2010). If communicated and used correctly, rankings are here to stay and cannot be ignored. If communicated and used correctly, rankings provide useful information and show case the academia in the global society. The challenge is to ensure they are not misused or over-interpreted.

The scrutiny of university performance and levels of global competition are growing all the time. As a result, young universities around the world are thinking harder than ever about how to improve their international standing. According to the Webometrics (http://www.webometrics.info/en, accessed on 1st May 2018), Kabale university was for example ranked in 2018 as presented in Table 1.

Table1. *Kabale University ranking 2018*

Geographical Area	Kabale university Ranking	Total Number of Universities in the Geographical Area
Uganda	33	45
Sub-Saharan Africa	658	933
Africa	1086	1493

 Source: *http://www.webometrics.info/en, accessed on 1st May 2018, with author calculations.*

A young Kabale university was only ahead of 407 universities in Africa and needs therefore to think globally and there by improve its ranking. This can be done through the following:

- *Changing people`s incentives:* Usually, the average academic or administrator in a university is completely unaware of a university`s strategy document. Therefore if a staff, and monitor performance from top. . Marketing experts may advise us that we need to elaborate brochures, but the effect of these on the internal community is questionable.

- *To attract the best faculty, you need the best leaders:* If raising or maintaining research quality is part of the strategy, hire the best scholars you can and put them in positions of power eg. Deputy Vice-Chancellor for research, Dean or Head Of Department. The best universities and business schools have been shown to hire the best scholars as their Heads. The probable reason is that other great scholars will choose to be there because the culture

and values of the place will likely be more amenable under a fellow researcher. A successful scholar may feel less threatened by someone "famous" coming in. If a Dean or Vice Chancellor of research is not a good scholar, he or she may have limited credibility and power within the institution. No one would pay any attention to a Vice-Chancellor with few publications telling other staff to improve their research output.

- *Control quality through hiring*: The vice-chancellor is the standard and flag bearer, and, therefore, he or she should set the quality threshold in the institution. If you want good hires to be made, then control the process yourself. Humans tend to select others who are like themselves. A hiring panel made up of grade-one researchers is unlikely to want to hire a grade-one (famous scholar) researcher. It is good to create a committee to advise the Vice-Chancellor on policies of hiring, promotion and probation decisions. Ultimately, if this process is going to work, it has to be driven and monitored by a leader ie. the Vice Chancellor.

- *Too much change creates no gain*: Too much organizational change drives people mad. University strategy is usually initiated and led by the vice chancellor. Leaders should have control of the strategy and the concomitant powers to make it happen. To avoid the institution`s strategy flip-flopping each time a new leader arrives, the board should attempt to bear overall responsibility for it. It needn't be the only thing an incoming vice-chancellor thinks about (every leader will have his or her own agenda) but if a predecessor has invested university resources and effort, don't waste what has been achieved. Universities take a long time to change.

- *Pay a top salary if you want the right department Head*: There aren't many important posts in a university than the position of Head of department. Pulling teeth from angry is easier than hiring good Heads of department. A university should be prepared to pay decent salary for the privilege of a top-notch department head. Offer a lot more than one term`s sabbatical leave, often spent in rehab! Great department chairs make all the difference to the job of Vice-Chancellor. Again, heads of department should be among the best scholars in the university and the vice chancellor should be consulted when to make the appointment.

- *Incentive of raising research money*: Raising more research money should be on top of their list. This could be through partnerships with government, large organizations and Non-governmental organizations.

- *Reducing the number of committees*: Bureaucracy can be deterrent when trying to keep good staff. It slows everything down, affects innovation, weakens motivation, reduces research time and, therefore, quality. All committees, systems and processes should be assessed, and the question posed: how does this help the core business of research and teaching? If the case is unclear, get rid of it. Committee minutes and reports could be cut to a minimum so that the best people do not waste productive time on administration. This is especially relevant when trying to encourage scholars to take academic rather than management jobs.

- *Clarify the relationship between administrative and academic staff*: Many times have, academics and administrators moan about each other. The core business of a university (research and teaching) does not exist without academics. If a great scholar leaves, it will have negative implications for the whole institution. That needs to be known by everyone. Similar, the role of administrators is sometimes viewed as "less important" by academics. But the relationship between academics and administrators is interdependent. Better communication and a bit of more networking time together could make the whole world of difference. If the central admiration is located in a building miles away from the academics, mutual respect and understanding will be less likely to develop. According to Chin-Heng Lim and Freddy Boey (2014). Education and research have to be greatly supported and enabled by a strong administration and governance section.

- *Start to train scholars in management when they are young*: Good scholars make the best leaders in universities and therefore these potential scholar-leaders need to be trained early in their careers. Much management is viewed as overly long-winded and not tailored to the academics. Young scholars have almost no incentive to go on these type of courses, because

they are viewed as being detrimental to their research careers. Short, concise but relevant courses should be offered with necessary incentives to researchers throughout their careers.

- *Tell Government `No!`* : University leaders are the fore front of the sector. Being a vice-chancellor is without doubt the hardest job in higher education. But it is depressing when we hear that universities will have to pay for the mess caused by the vice-chancellor. University leaders should not lie down when things are not going on well but should be able to tell Government so.

- *Hire a scholar as a leader:* Evidence from research shows that the best universities are led by outstanding scholars and also that better scholars improve the future performance of universities. For example, the vice-chancellor or DVC Academic should be at least as good as the top 6percent of scholars in the institution.

- *Give the leader plenty of power (or don't bother hiring one):* Leaders need power if they are to be effective. Don't force them to go through loads of committees before a decision can be made. Give a leader power and his or her own modest pot of money, but ensure that you have a decent chair of the Board or Council acting as overseer.

- *Let the leader pick his or her own team*: A university head must have the power to propose (or better still pick) his or her top management team. The vice chancellor should if possible, select the top team within the first few months of being in post.

- *Make sure the leader stays at least five years-and preferably more*: A university leader who is in post for much less than five years is unlikely to have the institution`s best interests at heart. But the Vice-chancellors shouldn't overstay in an institution for too long.

- *Supporting students through the financial aid:* Lack of financial resources is a major reason why students drop out of universities. In response to this challenge, institutions are crafting strategies to guide students in gaining funding. The university should be able to make the available scholarships known to the students by say pinning the information on notice boards, providing links on the university website from outside and from within students should be aware of all these opportunities.

- *Providing flexibility through digital services*: When institutions deliver services such as lecturing, registration, and financial aid only through face to face meetings during normal business hours, students who have jobs, families, and other off-campus responsibilities are less likely to take advantage of them. To broaden access to services, universities are adopting a growing number of digitally enabled student services, in addition to traditional in-person services offered on campus. While most institutions deliver basic digital services such as course registration, library resources, and financial aid information, young universities should consider an integrated approach to digitizing these services.

- *Strategic external partnerships*: Many individuals and organizations can help students along the path to success. A university that forges relationships with outside entities offers its students an edge in their academic careers and beyond. An institution might, for example partner with high schools to help students for higher education. In this case, the students might end up being attracted to the university.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper summarizes the challenges the marketing strategies for young universities, particularly African universities. It shows opportunities available to fight these challenges and the required investment plans which could be used to win the battles of competition between universities in order to survive and be ranked among the best universities in the region or at least African continent.

African universities, in their journey to excel in the new generation to come and for life long, must prepare themselves and be ready to face the challenges and threats using appropriate tools to maintain and build institutional position and reputation.

These universities are at crossroads and therefore need to advance an agenda that will change the current state affairs. This paper has talked about some of the items on the agenda but there are many others one would think of and enable the universities to position themselves and make a difference in the region, where they operate or in the African continent..

Young universities must do the best they can to continuously improve their programs, teaching provision of learning facilities in order to find the right way to global competition which is growing all time and to the world ranking.

REFERENCES

[1]   Akilagpa Sawyerr (2004), Challenges Facing African universities: Selected issues, Vol. 47, no.1 (Apr., 2004), African studies Review Journal Article, Cambridge University Press, stable URL: http:// www. jstor.org/stable/1514797

[2]   Badat S.(2010), Global rankings of universities: a perverse and present burden. Whose interests are we serving? Global inequalities and higher education. Palgrave Mac-millan GlobalTech Alliance. www.global techalliance.org/(accessed 1 May 2018)

[3]   Barnett,R.(2009), Knowledge interests and knowledge policies: Rethinking the university in the Twenty First century, in R.Barnett, J-C Guedon, J Masschelein and M.Simons, S. Robertson and N.Standaert, Rethinking the University After Bologna,Antwerpen: UCSIA

[4]   Chin-Hebg Lim. Freddy Boey (2014), Strategies for academic and research excellence for a young university: perspectives from Singapore, Ethics in science and environmental politics, Contribution to the theme Section `Global university rankings uncovered`, Vol.13:113-123.2004, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

[5]   Hazelkorn E(2008), Globalization, internationalization and rankings.Int High Educ 53: 8-10 http://www .webometrics.info/en,accessed on 1st May 2018

[6]   Justas Nugaras &Romualdas Ginevicius (2015), the strategic assessment of networking of a higher education institution, Economic Research-Ekonomska Istrazivanja,28: 1,31-44,DOI: 10.1080/1331677X. 2014.995963

[7]   Loobuyck P (2009), What kind of university rakings do we want? Ethical perspect 16:207-224

[8]   Marginson S (2008), Globalization, national development and university rankings. International symposium: University ranking: Global trends and comperative perspectives, 12-November 2008, Hanoi (electronic version available at www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/people/marginsondocs/VNU%20ranking%20 rankings%20symposium% 2013% 20 November % 202008.pdf)\

[9]   Olds, K.,& Robertson,S.L(2012). Towards a global data set for World university rankers. Retrieved from http://globalhighered.wordpress.com/2012/06/04/towards-a-global-common-data-set-for-world-university-rakers/

[10] Rauvargeers, A.(2013). Global university rankings and their impact: Report 11.Brussels: European University Association.

[11] Robertson,S.L(2010), Challeges Facing Universities in Globalising World, published by the centre for Globalisation, Education and societies, University of Bristol BS81JA,UK at: http://susanleerobertson.com/ publications/

[12] Saisana M, D`Hombres B. (2008), Higher education rankings; Robustness issues and critical assessment. How much confidence can we have in Higher Education Rankings? Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg

[13] Santos,B.(2010), The European University at crossroads, Keynote address to the XXII Anniversary of the Magna Charta Universitatum, University of Bologna.