

Article

Sustainability Promotion and Branding: Messaging Challenges and Possibilities for Higher Education Institutions

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Received: 14 July 2009 / Accepted: 25 August 2009 / Published: 31 August 2009

Abstract: This paper reports on case study research into six higher education institutions (three in the UK and three in the USA) that give prominence to their sustainability credentials in their paper form and/or electronic promotional and recruitment materials. The purpose of the research was to draw important lessons and identify significant issues concerning the sustainability branding and marketing of higher education institutions. Key findings include, first, the importance of calibrating sustainability marketing according to actual sustainability performance while also embracing a sustainability vision; second, the importance of combining internal with external marketing; third, the importance of institutional clarity in determining marketing parameters; fourth, the advantages of marrying broad-based ‘subtle’ marketing with intensive niche and segment marketing. It was found, too, that higher education institutions with a sustainability brand are not collecting systematic data to assess marketing impact on student recruitment, or utilizing the sustainability/employability interface to good marketing effect, or employing a multi-dimensional conception of sustainability in their marketing. There is clear evidence of the stirrings of movement away from paper-form towards electronic marketing across the cases considered. An overarching insight of the study is that rigorous institutional engagement with marketing sustainability credentials can have a significant impact on the quality and depth of sustainability performance by helping spread, enrich and diversify the institutional sustainability culture.

Keywords: education for sustainability; sustainability; university; marketing; branding

1. Introduction: Terra Nova: Marketing, the University and Sustainability

A recent paper by Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka systematically reviewing literature on higher education (HE) marketing suggests that ‘HE marketing is incoherent, even inchoate and lacks theoretical models that reflect upon the particular context of HE and the nature of their service’ [1]. It adds that research into higher education marketing ‘is still at a relatively pioneer stage with much research still to be carried out from both a problem identification and strategic perspective’. Their review of 15 empirical papers suggests, *inter alia*, that:

- A substantial information gap exists between the choice factors important to student consumers and the information provided by universities in their communications;
- As against transactional (price, place, promotion, product) marketing models, relational marketing (based on building an ongoing relationship between customer and service provider) might be a more viable and identity building approach, promoting ‘the involvement of students in the marketing and image-building of their institutions’.
- The power and flexibility of electronic databases were now allowing for ‘segment profiling,’ streamlining marketing practices behind multiple brand differentiations.
- Universities may need to re-position themselves to attract successive generations of students and to direct marketing efforts at ‘developing longer-term institutional visions and missions that incorporated marketing as an integral component of development plans’.

‘The notion of branding’, the authors assert, ‘has barely made its mark in higher education marketing’.

Literature specifically on marketing the sustainability credentials of a university is thin on the ground and largely tangential to topic. Carrying implications for sustainability marketing is a research report from the UK-based StudentForce for Sustainability [2] exploring the interface between sustainability and employability. It cites evidence that for students the environmental and social responsibility of the prospective employer is ‘not the main deciding factor’ but a ‘differentiating’ factor in choice of job, the report concluding that, while higher education institutions are responding to the sustainability agenda in terms of campus changes, curriculum development and community partnerships, they are lagging behind in terms of giving prominence to sustainability competencies and careers. Employers, for their part, expressed the need for graduate recruits with the competencies to support their corporate social responsibility endeavors. Following Cade [2], but also Veloutsou *et al.*’s [3] finding that applicants to university apply a cost/benefit analysis in their choice of institution, there would seem to be potential in marketing the skills and career opportunities, and overall professional advantage, arising from sustainability immersion at university.

The work of Hitchcock and Willard [4] with regard to embedding sustainability in corporate sector marketing carries significant ramifications for a university intending to market its sustainability credentials. For them sustainability can enhance the image and brand of an organization. Referring to the sustainability branding of Honda and Toyota, they argue that sustainability can play a proactive and energizing role for an organization, galvanizing employees while building a new loyalty in customers. ‘Sometimes’, they aver, ‘you have to go beyond what your customers are asking for’. They identify four important aspects to sustainability marketing:

- *Timing.* Avoiding going public with a sustainability branding before there are substantive developments on which to ground claims made.
- *Focus.* Determining whether to attach the sustainability brand to all products and lines or to a restricted number of products and lines (with the danger that non-encompassed lines ‘look bad in comparison’).
- *Target.* Determining whether to target a particular segment of population or to opt for broad scatter marketing.
- *Framing.* Framing a raft of messages, some of potentially wide appeal and some enticing particular interest groups.

Sustainability marketing, then, needs to mesh with an institution’s sense of the width and depth of its actual and aspired to sustainability commitments and credentials.

Looking at the history of marketing between 1985 and 2005, Badot *et al.* [5] count some fifty ‘marketing panaceas,’ i.e., proposed alternatives to mainstream marketing thinking and practice, designed to address the rapid transformation of the social, technical and cultural landscape, including market globalization. For Belz and Peattie [6], most of these ‘panaceas’ amounted to adjustments rather than radical alternatives to conventional marketing practice. Standing out as transformational were two streams of ideas and proposals: one shifting the focus of marketing from straightforward commercial transaction with the customer to a maintained relationship [relational or relationship marketing]; the other attempting to create a fit, previously not evident, between marketing and ecological and social realities. From the confluence of the two streams, both addressing the ‘crisis’ of marketing identified by Grönroos [7] as occasioned by a failure to evolve with the times, and the mood of the times, emerged the idea of sustainability marketing. For Belz and Peattie, sustainability marketing ‘represents an evolution of marketing that blends the mainstream economic and technical perspectives of relationship marketing and the social, ethical, environmental and intergenerational perspectives of the sustainable development agenda’ [6].

The literature on sustainability in higher education offers multiple renditions of the sustainability university. Velazquez *et al.* [8] and Beringer [9] provide models for the sustainability university, together with checklists of key dimensions, while seeing it as an unfolding ‘work in perpetual progress’. It is noteworthy that a sustainability marketing strategy *per se* fails to figure in the models, checklists and means of fostering sustainability advanced (although internal and external communication feature). Put another way, an integral role for marketing personnel in contributing to the process of sustainability-related change, on the one hand, and in projecting and, hence, confirming and helping consolidate achievements emerging from that process, on the other, is not considered.

While pointing to ‘a lack of empirical evidence with respect to sustainability communication in higher education institutions,’ Franz-Balsen and Heinrichs argue that the robust sustainability university has ‘an open way of managing sustainability communication’ [10], a point echoed in the emphasis on internal marketing in several of the case studies presented below.

2. A Note on Methodology

A multiple case study methodology [11] was applied to answering the following research questions:

- How do universities and colleges project and brand themselves according to sustainability goals and commitments, and to what known effect in terms of student recruitment and retention?
- What does an artifact/media analysis of the promotional/marketing materials of sustainability-branded universities reveal?

While qualitative case study research concerns ‘an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon or social unit’ [12], a *multicase* or *multisite* study collects and analyzes data from several cases. The more cases included in the study ‘the more compelling an interpretation is likely to be,’ the inclusion of multiple cases ‘enhancing the external validity or generalizability’ of findings [11]. This seemed an especially apposite approach for an area so far given little academic attention.

Selection of participating institutions occurred in two stages. First, UK and US universities and colleges with sustainability credentials were searched through the Internet using the descriptor ‘sustainability (eco/green) university/college’. Institutions were also identified using the following websites: the Grist list of the 15 top international Green Colleges and Universities [13]; and the US Eco League site describing a consortium of five US liberal arts colleges specializing in education directed towards building a sustainable society [14].

After coming up with a long list of potential participating universities and colleges, each institution was approached by email to ascertain their preparedness and availability to participate in the study. Once preparedness and availability were ascertained, and the degree of sustainability marketing confirmed as ‘significant’ through an initial perusal of paper-form and website promotional materials, the researchers arrived at a short list of participating institutions, choosing institutions dissimilar in size, ethos, location and range of courses so as to be able to explore whether these variables influenced opportunities, constraints and approaches to marketing sustainability.

The following data from each institution were accessed/gathered and then systematically analyzed: the university/college website; paper-form prospectuses; additional paper-form and electronic marketing materials; a transcribed semi-structured interview with a university/college officer with responsibility for sustainability marketing.

Interview participants were asked whether they would prefer themselves and their institution to be anonymized. All opted for their institution to be named. All, save one, chose to be personally identified.

3. Six Case Studies

3.1. UK Case Study 1: The University of Bradford (Ecoversity)

The University of Bradford opened in 1966. Located in the north of England, Bradford is well known for its multicultural heritage and ethos and was named Britain’s ‘greenest city’ by the Sustainable Cities Index in 2007 [15].

The university mission, 'Making Knowledge Work', seeks to capture the intention of being 'a forward-thinking, modern and student-oriented university with thriving and vibrant student communities'. It expresses a strong commitment to 'confronting inequality and celebrating diversity' [16]. With three campuses located within the city of Bradford, the university enjoys a multicultural learning environment with over 8,500 undergraduate and 1,500 graduate students from very diverse backgrounds, faiths and ethnicities. It employs around 2,000 full-time and 1,300 part-time staff.

The University's commitment to sustainable development was underlined by the launch of an Ecoversity programme in 2005. The Ecoversity aims at 'embed[ing] the principles and practice of sustainable development across the entire institution by getting people involved, taking the lead on issues, and encouraging and making it easier for people to adopt sustainable behaviours and lifestyles' [17].

Peter Hopkinson, Director of Education for Sustainable Development explains that data gathered over years from prospective students at Open Days revealed a general disappointment with the physical campus. Therefore, initially, the Ecoversity initiative focused on the task of improving the campus environment, whilst at the same time preparing the groundwork for campus developments to be linked to curricular innovation and student well being.

He explains that, from the outset, the vision of Ecoversity 'captured the imagination and commitment of senior management, in particular the previous Vice Chancellor'.

This initiative, which has always been strong on vision and aspiration, has gone through a steep learning curve in terms of its marketing strategy, as well as undergoing a recent fundamental shift concerning where the initiative sits within the institution. One reflection is that early stage marketing of Ecoversity was, in retrospect, overly enthusiastic and therefore created expectations that were not only ambitiously high but at times 'ridiculously so'. There has recently been a significant amount of activity closing the gap between vision and reality.

The arrival of a new Vice-Chancellor in July 2007, strongly supportive of Ecoversity, brought about 'a dramatic change' especially in 'the way the university operates and sees itself' (Director, Education for Sustainable Development). The appointment of the Pro Vice Chancellor for Learning and Teaching as the head of Ecoversity led to an immediate shift in the Ecoversity marketing message. The Director of Education for Sustainable Development elaborates:

The message is in part about celebrating the commitment to change, in part about how we are finding the journey, as well as flagging up the concrete positive changes that are definitely being brought about. Having started from such a low base, an aspect of seeking to become a beacon is to consciously untangle the journey, fold the learning back in, share the lessons. When you raise too many expectations too soon, the danger is that the marketing machine can go into overdrive and you end up with an unhelpful version of what you supposedly are. We've struggled a bit with the legacy that past marketing tendencies unintentionally left us with, but as a consequence have become much more thoughtful.

A greater emphasis has latterly been put on developing internal marketing strategies and using intra-university communication mechanisms creatively. Ecoversity's earliest experiences were ones of failing to exploit internal opportunities for marketing the initiative and so contributing to a build up of

cynicism, skepticism and disaffection within the university community due to lack of available and up to date information. The Director of Education for Sustainable Development thinks that 'more appropriate and fit-for-purpose marketing opportunities can and do arise from actually engaging with change processes'. 'We have just issued our first Ecoversity newspaper which, rather than a corporate style publication, has been designed with the purpose of developing a two-way conversation with the staff and students around Ecoversity'.

Underpinning the changes described above has been the appointment of two researchers whose brief includes the systematic development of research programs to explore the impact of Ecoversity. Impact studies are to include the so far neglected area of monitoring student recruitment and retention statistics attributable to the Ecoversity.

Ecoversity's increasing emphasis on demonstrating a solid, everyday commitment to sustainable development has led to improvements in the production of annual prospectuses that, for 2009, include clear statements that recycled paper and water-based and vegetable-based ink have been employed in their production. People are even beginning to ask more fundamental questions about why print brochures in the first place.

The Director of Education for Sustainable Development's advice for universities and colleges wishing to market their sustainability credentials is to take a 'very cautious, thoughtful approach, to review regularly and always make room for organic development'. For him, a checklist might look something like:

- What are you going to market? If it is aspirational, can you subsequently live up to it? If it is to celebrate an achievement, what's your evidence base?
- Underlying messages should have long enough shelf lives: you may want an overall message that allows room for substantial changes of foci in terms of local projects.
- Have you conducted a risk assessment in terms of getting the marketing wrong? This can be useful when trying to get it right, as you learn what to avoid.
- Be honest about failures without over-selling them. Do enough reflection to see the learning curves in all 'mistakes'. Market them externally as recommendations, internally as evidence of reflective and consultative management.
- Exploit all sources of data that tell you something is changing for the better without losing transparency as to the method of data collection and size of effect.

3.2. UK Case Study 2: Durham University

Situated in North East England, Durham University has over 15,000 students on its main campus, the undergraduate population totaling over 11,500 with over 3,500 engaged in postgraduate study. The University employs just over 2,400 staff [18].

Adam Brown, the Marketing Manager at the University considers it important that prospective students see that the University is aware of its environmental responsibilities, and believes that this forms an additional factor in helping potential students to choose Durham. On the main University website [18] the 'Environment and Sustainability' page can be easily accessed. It highlights the use of 100% renewable energy, the yearly increase in proportion of waste recycled, ethical procurement, and the Sustainable Living Action Group, a student led initiative.

The University provides an online personalized PDF version of the prospectus for students to download: 'Your Prospectus: Create Your Prospectus—Durham University'. This personalized prospectus is held online to re-access for 7 days. The Marketing Manager thinks this a sensible approach since individual students can decide whether they want to print it off or read it on-screen. He also highlights the use of a 'mini prospectus' (24 pages) in place of the full prospectus (216 pages) at recruitment events, with the intention of driving students online to 'Your Prospectus'.

The promotion of sustainability is something that 'we have been looking at for a long time, over a number of years,' says the Marketing Manager. He highlights the issue of recycling used cooking oils at the university linked with bio-fuel use as an example. Emphasizing the importance of linking the external marketing of an institution's sustainability credentials with changing the culture of an institution through effective internal communication, he adds:

With many universities and colleges it is an evolving process. It is something that is happening over a number of years. There needs to be a certain amount of internal communication to get people involved. We have to make sure that people actually engage with it internally and then make it part of the culture.

The impact that promoting the university's sustainability credentials has had on the recruitment and retention of students and staff has not yet been formally measured ('too early to say at this stage'). Nonetheless, offering and communicating a clear commitment on the direction the university is moving with regard to sustainability is considered as motivational for students: 'they are actually more likely to get involved if they know that the institution has a positive attitude towards [sustainability]'.

The promotion of sustainability credentials at Durham is at present more focused on internal rather than external promotion, the university recognizing its 'environmental responsibilities' as an institution rather than being led by a vision and mission of becoming a comprehensively sustainability-focused university.

3.3. UK Case Study 3: University of Leeds

Leeds University, situated in the north of England, has some 8,000 staff and some 30,500 undergraduate and postgraduate students. In its 'About the University' website [19], there is a page with the title 'Environmental Management' [20] in which the University 'recognizes the importance of the environment' and lays out its environmental management credentials in the areas of carbon reduction, energy and water, transport, waste management and recycling, fair-trade and sustainable purchasing. The page has a hyperlink through to a *Green Guide Towards Sustainable Living in Leeds* [21] for students. One page (p. 26) in the *Guide* is devoted to answering the question 'How Green is the University?' The emphasis on the page again focuses on environmental management while also flagging the sustainability orientation of much academic research at the University. The February 2006 University Environmental Policy, also hyperlinked from the 'Environmental Management' page, similarly focuses on campus environmental impacts and their management, embracing learning only in terms of awareness raising about impacts. There are hyperlinks on the page to specific University academic units and programmes with an environmental focus. Winning the 2006

UK Green Gown Award for waste management [22] and a 2007 Continuous Improvement Award [23], the University has some thirty staff dedicated to environmental management.

According to Helen Clapham, Head of Student Recruitment and Marketing, while Leeds has made considerable efforts in terms of environmental management, sustainable procurement and transport, there have been no concerted efforts to embed sustainability more widely, including into learning and teaching, nor, correlatively, to promote a wider range of sustainability credentials. 'It is not,' she says, 'within the DNA of the organization yet'.

There is, though, more than a premonition that the promotion of the University's environmental management performance and achievements needs further honing, given the importance new generations of students are attaching to the issue. While the university is unlikely to adopt a more comprehensive approach to addressing the sustainability agenda, the Head of Student Recruitment and Marketing is aware that, unless rising student expectations in this area are seen to be met, there could be an adverse impact on recruitment:

I think what will happen is that particularly with students we are trying to attract who are becoming increasingly sustainability aware, that it will be an expectation that we meet various standards and meet an obligation. I think some institutions are planning to be the first really sustainable institution and this is how they are positioning themselves. And I don't think we will go down that route. That is not where our strengths lie. But I think increasingly if you can't answer questions about your carbon footprint, recycling, etc., you may lose students in the future.

Marketing sustainability or corporate social responsibility credentials, even where the agenda is professedly less than comprehensive, she says, requires a backcloth of genuine good practice and achievement. 'When it comes to marketing, you need to be absolutely authentic because people will find you out'.

3.4. US Case Study 1: The College of the Atlantic

The College of the Atlantic (COA) is a small liberal arts college of some 325 students and 30 faculty situated on an island off the coast of Maine, half of which falls within the Acadia National Park. The College mission statement concerns enriching the liberal arts tradition with a 'human ecological perspective' focusing on human beings within their social and natural communities [24].

Opening in 1969, COA's engagement with environmental studies was woven into its founding philosophy. According to Sarah Baker, Dean of Admissions, the College had become complacent about promoting its environmental credentials but recently growing 'competition for that market interested in environmentalism' brought about a sea change. Sustainability became a key message, included in the College President's speeches to different constituencies and folded into press releases and recruitment sections of the website. In the Dean of Admissions' view, a potentially powerful marketing tool is the College *Viewbook*, reviewed and overhauled every three years, and currently undergoing a radical reorientation:

We are actually doing an issue-centered Viewbook. We are not treating it as a 'here is our beautiful library, here are our happy students sitting under a pretty tree having fun', that sort of thing. Instead, we are working on picking out half a dozen issues - things like poverty, hunger, suburban and urban sprawl, water rights, and preservation of biodiversity. Picking some key issues and using those as a launch pad for telling the story of COA and using examples of student projects, from courses on campus and things our alumni are doing in those fields. To try to be in some ways more realistic and less glossy.

The *Viewbook* is, perhaps, the flagship development in efforts to promote the College's sustainability credentials by adopting a distinctive slant. It was early recognized that marketing distinctiveness would only work were there actually distinctive features in the College's sustainability efforts to draw upon. As the Dean of Admissions puts it: 'we have to make sure that we are always at the forefront and that we are always articulating the fact that we are at the forefront'. In this regard, the College has proved very imaginative. New courses have been brought in with an accent upon community development and practical and marketable skills for sustainability. These include a Practical Activism course. A Director of Sustainability was hired who has headed up much-vaunted Dark Skies (reducing lighting on campus) and net-zero carbon emission initiatives. New student housing, built to high sustainability standards, and co-designed by students and staff, is soon to open. An island organic farm staffed by students and alumni is linked to the College and brings students and youth on the island into working contact. A student-led community light bulb exchange, subsidized by the State of Maine, looks set to make the island an exclusively compact florescent light community within eighteen months.

The College's embrace and promotion of such initiatives, formal and informal, has, in the view of the Dean of Admissions, led to 'more applications and applications from stronger students' (a shift in the last ten years from 25% to 50% of students being of the 'top grade'). News stories have been particularly important in exciting the interest of prospective students. The December 2007 announcement that the College had reached net-zero carbon emissions led to 25% more hits on the recruitment website. A pronounced sustainability ethic has also led to heightened competition for academic jobs and improved staff retention at the College even though salaries are some \$5,000–10,000 lower than at major state universities.

Key to marketing, it appears, has been, first, the projecting of the College as a place where rhetoric is matched by concrete developments, 'that has principles that walk the walk instead of just talk the talk' (Dean of Admissions). Second, it has been very important to be able to convey to prospective students and staff that the College is a community that has a solid record of sustainability action ('hard facts and examples at the ready'). For this latter reason, an institution needs 'a year or two of examining and changing practices before you can really trot out that label of "we are a sustainable institution"' (Dean of Admissions).

Promotional materials [25,26]—addressing economic and social as well as environmental dimensions of sustainability—are produced on recycled and chlorine free paper. The shift, according to the Dean of Admissions, is towards Internet and e-form promotion and recruitment, another means of projecting the College 'walking the walk'.

3.5. US Case Study 2: Ithaca College

Ithaca College, situated in Ithaca, New York State, describes itself as a ‘liberal arts and professional preparation college’. Founded in 1892 as a music college, it has some 6,000 undergraduate and 400 graduate students with 460 full-time and 210 part-time faculty members [27].

According to Marian Brown, the Special Assistant to the Provost, Ithaca’s marketing of its sustainability credentials has been a ‘back-handed’ approach. Over a number of years there had been ‘a grassroots effort to get sustainability embedded in the College fabric and have it embraced as a core institutional value’. The accumulating effect of initiatives in curriculum, community and operations spheres had led the College Marketing/Communications Group to sit up and take note. ‘Our Marketing Group is catching up with us, so we are beginning to see, in the last two years, more marketing pieces beginning to infuse more sustainability messaging into recruitment for new students’. The approach remains, however, ‘a little scattershot ...it is not cohesive and it is not yet strongly under-girded, and the messaging is not consistent throughout’.

For the Marketing/Communications Group:

Sustainability presents an evocative image, what we call a BHAG (‘a Big Hairy Audacious Goal’), a larger vision. Sustainability is very inspirational and aspirational for students and faculty. Our development people really like that kind of idea, something beyond the College that is great to hang marketing efforts on (Special Assistant to the Provost).

The attractiveness of the big vision notwithstanding, the question follows of how to concretely embed sustainability within the marketing strategy. Here Ithaca has come up with a range of noteworthy approaches.

First, acknowledging that recipients of the College’s recruitment materials have varying levels of interest in and commitment to sustainability, the College has lighted upon what the Special Assistant to the Provost calls a subtle messaging approach:

It is a matter of how to incorporate sustainability themes but not overwhelm the marketing pieces. How can the messaging be very subtly reinforced throughout the media so if they are looking for it, they can see it? If they are not looking for that message in particular, you are still using the communication as an opportunity to teach more about it without being heavy-handed.

Another learning concerns the importance of enabling students already on campus to tell their own sustainability-related stories through the marketing materials as a persuasive means of recruitment. *Fuse*, a new and very attractively produced paper-form and on-line magazine appearing each semester [28-30], does just that and is received by all prospective students. There are also student stories in the brochures of the academic schools.

Recruitment materials are seen as but the initial level of a three-tier approach to marketing sustainability. At the next level is internal marketing to maintain the sustainability profile and further build a sustainability culture but not least with an eye to student (and staff) retention. *Intercom*, an internal electronic message system, is used to communicate sustainability activities across the

institution in addition to press releases and other announcements. A ‘Green Thumbs-Up’ citations scheme gives regular recognition through *Intercom* to student and staff members of the Ithaca community who have contributed to sustainability endeavors. At the third tier, the ‘back end’, sustainability is marketed to alumni, donors and corporate sponsors through the quarterly, *ICView* [31,32].

Ithaca is not yet tracking recruitment and retention trends based on marketing sustainability credentials. The data available is anecdotal but does suggest that, in some schools, for instance, Business, sustainability marketing is having an upward impact on recruitment. There is ‘very definite trending upward in terms of graduate employability in sustainability fields’.

The Special Assistant to the Provost acknowledges that students are increasingly gravitating towards web-based recruitment and promotional materials but concedes that the College has still much to do by way of framing sustainability messages through the student voice and through preferred student media:

I had some students in our Communications School come up with a portal design, one that they would like to use. I looked at their mock-up, and honestly, the hair on the back of my neck went up. Someone in my demographic wants to have clean, organized screens, with logical links to other screens. These kids want to enter a portal that is sort of the Yahoo site where everything comes up at once, with lots of interactive choices: pictures, graphics, multiple icons all on one screen, a ‘one stop shop’ they can view to select their next shop. The degree of screen clutter and information overload makes me nuts. But I have to step back and stay focused on the needs of the audience. I would caution people to examine very carefully how you market and appeal to students. We are not doing a good enough job of that yet. The students are telling us that. We need to use all the communications channels that students use. Should we be podcasting content or You-Tube-ing video messages, for instance? We are not doing that now, but why couldn’t we be doing that? We do not need to appeal to the sixty-something professor; it is the twenty-something student we need to be attuned to.

One side-effect of the College’s embrace of a sustainability ethic and the trend away from paper-form marketing has been the switch to ‘on-demand printing’:

Admissions have slashed the number of prospectuses they are producing. Our print shop is now able to print those pieces on campus, so we can do on-demand printing. You can tailor content in a piece for a specific audience and then print out ...It is very consumptive of our Marketing Group’s time to try to customize these pieces. But it enables us to vastly reduce the number we are tossing out at the end of a particular marketing campaign.

This development has been accompanied, at no extra cost, with the adoption of ‘100% recycled content paper’ as well as ‘soya inks, and other green printing strategies’ for all College paper-form materials.

3.6. US Case Study 3: St. Lawrence University

Located in the north east of New York State, St. Lawrence University (SLU) offers a four-year liberal arts undergraduate program and, additionally, a graduate program in education. There are presently 2,198 undergraduate and 121 graduate students taught by 171 full-time and 19 part-time academic staff. A Sustainability Coordinator is charged with overseeing and taking forward sustainability-related developments and is supported by a second full-time appointment [33].

Founded as a seminary in 1856 and becoming a university that same year, SLU has long aligned itself with environmentalism. This has been, in part, a matter of laying out the attractions of its lake and mountain setting. Set in an outstanding wilderness area, outdoor extra-curricular and linked-to-curriculum opportunities have long been flagged to prospective students. Second, SLU has drawn many of its students from rural communities in the north east of New York State, students in the main seeking an experience with a rural undergraduate education. 'We have been green before green was popular', comments, the Associate Vice-President for University Relations, the officer responsible for marketing. 'Our rural location has contributed to the ethos on campus as well as to the founding of the university and the founding principles of the university all contribute to what we now call sustainability. ...So being more obvious about our sustainability credentials is rooted in the history at St. Lawrence. ...It is part of our culture'. That culture has been reinforced, she adds, by the fact of having so many students coming from communities 'that have a greater connection to the land ...a very important core market for us'.

Interestingly, there are five slim SLU prospectuses sent in response to enquiries, two of which directly concern the environment. The first, titled *Place* [34] devotes its 24 pages to describing the environmental and cultural attractions of the campus and its surroundings, as well as the well-developed SLU 14-country study abroad program. The emphasis throughout is on culture, nature and their inter-linkages as well as on the importance of place in developing identity and love of nature. The second, titled *Welcome to Our World* [35] describes in 28 pages the academic programs offered at SLU through the narratives of its students.

SLU offers an interdisciplinary environmental studies program but, according to a survey conducted by the Office of University Relations, courses with an environmental focus are offered by a further 36 other departments within their major programs. On last inspection, says the Associate Vice-President, it was possible to 'scan our catalogue and find environmentalism pervading every department'. A flagship course, prominently publicized in both prospectuses is the Adirondack Semester, a three-month wilderness immersion experience program. As the Associate Vice-President describes it:

They go deep into the woods. ...They live off the land if you will. For periods of several weeks they take courses connected to sustainability. ...And those who are accepted for the program talk about it in ways that are transformative. They just completely change the way they look at the world. ... There aren't very many programs like this at all so we have really created something innovative.

According to the Associate Vice-President, there had been no systematic data collection to assess the impact of the SLU sustainability image upon student recruitment. Drawing upon anecdotal data, her view is that the branding has enabled SLU to become a magnet for students from or with experience of rural areas or natural areas: 'St. Lawrence has been in that niche market for a long time and we are pretty solidly there'.

The Associate Vice-President also points to the recruitment potential of being able to show that sustainability-focused learning enhances employability:

Many of our graduates go on to take leadership positions in organizations that have either sustainability as their core mission or who need and believe in sustainability as one of the aspects of their business whether it is a commercial business, a corporate entity or non-profit.

This claim appears credible in that SLU has become linked to a career-related business, founded by a graduate from the 1970s, the remit of which is to place 'environmental interns and environmental professionals across the nation'. The business:

Has been able to use St. Lawrence as a core of very highly qualified young graduates and place them in internships that have launched their careers (Associate Vice-President).

In sustainability commitment and communication, the Associate Vice-President avers, it is important to be transparent about associated tensions:

Environmental decisions are not easy ones to make. Often students come to us and believe that the environmental choice is the only choice. But when you are going to pay more for that environmental choice, something else is not going to happen. You might not have as much money for scholarship assistance for example and you might not have enough money for a renovation to a laboratory or a classroom that they also want. ...The tensions are very real and they are going to be stronger and stronger as sustainability gains higher visibility among out general culture and especially our young adult culture.

Of vital importance in marketing the sustainability credentials of any higher education institution, maintains the Associate Vice-President, is depth of commitment allied to evidence that backs up sustainability claims:

Unless you have a very strong and deep commitment to it you are going to be found out to be a bit of a fraud and that is going to work very much against you. ...If you are going to use sustainability as a marketing credential, have a lot of evidence behind you because people who believe in sustainability will want to see that evidence.

4. Reflections on the Case Studies

Taken together, the six case studies raise some important lessons and issues concerning the sustainability branding and marketing of a higher education institution. They can be summarized as follows:

i. Calibrate the level and volume of the marketing to coincide with the realities of sustainability adherence and performance. In all the cases are warnings against raising expectations through marketing and promotional materials when the sustainability substance is lacking, a cautionary note coinciding with Hitchcock and Willard's earlier noted emphasis on the timing of sustainability

marketing [4]. Looking back on the early days of the Bradford Ecoversity, the Director of Education for Sustainable Development rues the then ‘reckless’ marketing that ran the risk of institutional embarrassment and, in fact, provoked cynicism internally. The Head of Student Recruitment and Marketing at Leeds University speaks of the ‘need to be absolutely authentic because people will find you out’. As the Dean of Admissions at the College of the Atlantic points out, marketing sustainability credentials needs to be finely tuned to match definite and distinctive sustainability features. These warnings and recommendations speak for a studied and incremental sustainability marketing strategy that is never nearer than one step behind actual concrete sustainability developments. For the Dean of Admissions at the College of the Atlantic, an institution launching into sustainability initiatives needs ‘a year or two of examining and changing practices’ before it ‘can really trot out the label of “we are a sustainable institution” ’.

ii. That said, it is important and entirely appropriate to market sustainability intentions and an as yet unrealized vision (as long as the institution really means it). As the Director of Education for Sustainable Development at the Bradford Ecoversity indicates, projecting a vision of comprehensive and thoroughgoing institutional transformation is a positive as long as the vision is accompanied by transparency with regard to the current ‘state of the art’ and the challenges lying ahead. The three US cases featured here also marry sustainability vision with an account of ‘work in progress’, the Associate Vice-President for University Relations, St. Lawrence University, emphasizing the importance of being transparent about the tensions and conflicts that will arise as vision is translated into action. Cautions about building from solid achievement aside, it should not be overlooked that vision is both galvanizing and persuasive, what the Marketing and Communications Group at Ithaca College calls a ‘Big, Hairy, Audacious Goal’. The ‘BHAG’ approach accords with the argument of Hitchcock and Willard [4] that sustainability vision can be both catalytic and galvanizing for an institution.

iii. Determine, and be at ease with, what the institution is marketing. The six cases feature institutions where very different determinations have been made regarding what is being marketed. Two of the English universities, Durham and Leeds, choose to base their marketing upon their environmental management record. Recognizing that students are increasingly expecting institutions, including the university they are likely to favor, to demonstrate environmental prudence and responsibility, the two universities have made the strategic decision to showcase their improving environmental management performance. The wider adoption of a sustainability ethic, as the Head of Recruitment and Marketing at Leeds University puts it, ‘is not within the DNA’. At Bradford University the goal is to position and differentiate the institution as a ‘sustainability university’. The same is true of the three US institutions, all of which are building upon a long-standing institutional ethic in their comprehensive embrace of sustainability. It would seem that institutional size is a factor here with larger universities opting for the environmental management route and smaller universities and colleges aiming to be more comprehensive in their sustainability adherence.

iv. Whatever the marketing pitch, internal marketing must go hand in glove with external marketing. Most institutions featured in this study emphasize the importance of marrying internal marketing with external marketing not least to ensure that the university community understands and by and large embraces the marketing pitch so helping make the pitch a more or less solid one. As has

been noted, for Franz-Balsen and Heinrichs [10] open sustainability communication is a *sine qua non* of the robust sustainability university. The cynicism engendered at Bradford Ecoversity by the initial failure to pay heed to internal marketing has been highlighted. In most cases changing the university culture through effective internal communication was seen as a *sine qua non* if external marketing efforts were to be successful. Ithaca College has a comprehensive three-tier approach to marketing. External recruitment and promotional materials form the first tier. Internal marketing and communication to build the institutional sustainability culture form the second. Communications to alumni, donors and corporate sponsors forms the third. The second tier anchors the first and third tiers in that without a dynamic culture of sustainability there is insufficient for marketing efforts at the other two tiers to draw upon.

v. *Given that sustainability consciousness is still an emerging phenomenon, by no means universally shared, there is a case for subtle marketing alongside appealing to niche markets.* Recognizing the varying levels of interest and commitment to sustainability amongst intending applicants, Ithaca College has adopted a ‘subtle messaging’ approach, allowing its sustainability credentials to be clearly discerned ‘between the lines’ by those who are clued in while avoiding deterring applications from those who are indifferent to the sustainability agenda. Against a broad sustainability backcloth, all the US institutions featured here have also consciously gone about tapping sustainability enthusiasm through specific program provision, the Practical Activism course at the College of the Atlantic and Adirondack Seminar at St. Lawrence University being cases in point. A strategy carrying real potential, then, and one which by and large accords with the meta-research findings of Helmsley-Brown and Oplatka [1] cited in the opening section of this paper, would involve an admixture of background and foreground marketing, promoting overall institutional sustainability credentials subtly but sufficiently while engaging in strong marketing of niche programs that build upon the institution’s history, locale and specific areas of sustainability expertise and enthusiasm. For those not in beautiful wilderness areas, the locale for sustainability study immersion can be campus and immediate (urban/suburban) community.

vi. *There is, so far, precious little systematic collection of data, or availability of data, on the link between marketing sustainability credentials and student recruitment, retention and satisfaction.* Asked what evidence they had that marketing sustainability credentials impacted upon recruitment and retention, all interviewees relied upon what several referred to as ‘anecdotal’ evidence. The Bradford Ecoversity has appointed a research team of two to explore, amongst other things, the sustainability/recruitment connect but data collection instruments are still under development. Durham University so far has no formal means of measurement. Of the US higher education institutions, only the College of the Atlantic can cite figures for heightened interest in sustainability in the form of website hits following the College sustainability achievements featuring in the media. The others, like their UK counterparts, rely at this point on anecdotal data.

vii. *Sustainability marketing based upon emerging evidence and understandings of the links between sustainability skills and dispositions and graduate employability is largely lacking.* As the StudentForce for Sustainability survey [2] described earlier confirms, there is growing employer interest in graduates who are skilled in, informed about and committed to sustainability. In the light of

such evidence, it is interesting that only St. Lawrence University amongst the six institutions featured here promotes its sustainability credentials as a potential means of achieving heightened employability, its close association with a sustainability career agency being path finding in this regard. For the Special Assistant to the Provost at Ithaca College, there is ‘very definite trending upward in terms of graduate employability in sustainability fields’ but this sample of higher education institutions with a strong sustainability emphasis is, in the main, falling short of exploiting that trending.

viii. Others could follow their US counterparts by giving rein to student voice in marketing their sustainability credentials. Reviewing the paper-form, electronic and web-based marketing and promotional materials of the three US cases in this study, it is noteworthy how much emphasis is placed on students describing in their own words their on-campus and off-campus formal and informal sustainability learning experiences. Additionally, all three US institutions take pains to flag examples of student-led sustainability initiatives. There is both an explicit and implicit message about student empowerment. The UK universities featured here do not seem to have latched on to the potential of employing student sustainability narratives in their marketing. Put another way, unlike their US counterparts that are veering towards what Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka refer to as relational marketing [1], the UK institutions remain largely wedded to transactional marketing.

ix. The marketing landscape is changing with an emerging shift away from paper-form marketing towards electronic marketing using modalities that chime with student culture and environmental concerns. All the institutions featured in this survey walk their sustainability talk by using recycled and/or chlorine-free paper and vegetable-based inks. Some (Durham, Ithaca) are forging ahead with tailored to need and designed on demand paper form prospectus materials leading to substantial reductions in paper usage (and paper waste). Some, such as St. Lawrence University, have moved towards short often beautifully illustrated brochures and prospectuses that link to web-based or paper-form course catalogues. Scattered across the interview data is recognition that electronic marketing should and will replace paper-form materials. At the very least those responsible for marketing are questioning the continuance of the paper-form prospectus. The Special Assistant to the Provost at Ithaca College warns of the dangers of moving to e-form marketing through the eyes of ‘the sixty-something professor’ arguing that the forms of interactive web-based communication largely favored by younger students should be the chosen modalities of communication.

x. Sustainability messaging tends for the most part to treat ‘sustainability’ as synonymous with ‘environment’. While sustainability is widely construed as multi-dimensional, having cultural, economic, health, and social justice as well as environmental dimensions [36,37], university sustainability marketing appears to be preponderantly uni-dimensional. The institutions featured here convey sustainability as primarily an environmental concept. It would amount to spectacularly significant market positioning and differentiation, were a major, large-size university to project itself as a sustainability university committed to comprehensively addressing the multi-dimensionality of the idea.

5. Final Reflections

An overarching insight to be drawn from this study concerns the impact that rigorous institutional engagement with marketing sustainability credentials can have upon the quality and depth of sustainability performance. Throughout the six cases, there are signs, in some cases clear, in some cases only incipient, of a beneficial feedback loop in which administrators, academics and students begin to take on board the letter and spirit of the sustainability marketing thus deepening the embedding of sustainability commitment and adherence. It is clear, especially in the case of the smaller US institutions but also in the Bradford case, that effective sustainability messaging, both internal and external, captured the imagination of different sections of the university/college community and so helped spread, enrich and diversify the institutional sustainability culture. This insight is interpretable as demonstrating the efficacy of sustainability marketing as defined by Belz and Peattie [6] involving a confluence of relational and eco-ethical marketing. It also speaks to the potential benefits accruing from integrating marketing personnel into the strategic development of the sustainability university from a very early stage. Rather than being something of an afterthought, marketing, to re-quote Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka [1], might most usefully become ‘an integral component of development plans’.

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