

MISSION STATEMENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: CONTEXT ANALYSIS AND RESEARCH PROPOSITIONS

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Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to discuss the main issues that deal with higher education institutions' mission statements, from a marketing perspective. It has long been argued in the literature that missions represent the foundation upon which institutions build their strategic plans, and that they should be the first step any institution takes before designing its strategy. Mission statements have also been linked to the institutions' performance, and to the successful implementation of their strategies. Based on a review of the most recent literature in the field of higher education, the paper explains why missions appear as a relevant tool for the activity of higher education institutions, and provides insights into the way in which these institutions should engage in mission development. The main problems surrounding the development and implementation of missions are also discussed, with emphasis on their contribution in providing educational institutions with a clear direction when faced with the changing environment. Furthermore, given the fact that some authors argue the ineffectiveness of mission statements, the paper sets to establish whether they should still be given the same importance within higher education institutions, or should they be cast aside. Considering the contribution of higher education to society, we also discuss the topic of universities' third mission, service to society, which is beginning to be more and more embraced and implemented by higher education institutions. Throughout the paper, we argue that missions hold a significant role, and that is to provide universities with a course of action, and to guide them towards fulfilling their purpose within society. The authors complete the discussion by suggesting a number of research directions in the final sections of the paper, that show a large potential both for helping educational managers to improve their institutions' activity, and for building richer theories of marketing management.*

Key words: *higher education; mission statements; mission development; education marketing; strategy; education management.*

JEL classification: *M31, I23*

1. Introduction

Higher education today is marked by a series of changes and transformations that bring both opportunities, and threats to educational institutions. While the opportunities come from the economic and technological development, and can result in many great ways for these institutions to improve their activities, the challenges that universities face, force them to adapt their resources, academic programs, the investments they make in research, and other items, so that they may be able to continue to operate within the environment. All the elements mentioned above stand for the mission of a higher education institution (de Jager, 2001), and are supposed to be taken into account when designing the mission statement, so that they become part of the organizational culture of the institution, and be embraced and implemented by its employees.

Most higher education institutions have built a mission statement, and are constantly sharing it through their web-sites, flyers or other promotional materials. Generally, missions focus on the teaching and research activities, but a third mission is more and more beginning to be addressed by universities. The not-for-profit nature of educational institutions leads them to develop relationships with many stakeholders that need to be taken into account within the institutions' activities. Therefore, the service to the universities' communities is beginning to emerge as the third mission of education.

Marketing and management theory stress the importance of missions for strategic planning, as being the first step to be taken when designing an institution's strategy. Moreover, studies have shown that mission statements have a positive, though weak, influence on performance (Sidhu, 2003). Considering both the importance that organizational theory and practice have given to mission statements, and the rapidly changing environment in which universities are operating today, we believe it could be beneficial for universities to form a clear vision that incorporates future developments, and to consequently adapt their missions to fit that future.

The purpose of this paper is to review the main issues surrounding mission statements. We base our discussion on the most recent research on the topic, and provide some insights into the way in which educational institutions should engage in mission development. Furthermore, given the fact that some authors argue the ineffectiveness of mission statements, we set to establish whether they should still be given the same importance within higher education institutions, or should they be cast aside. The paper begins with a review of the concept, and its main features, but also addresses the concerns of those who do not believe in it, or think it should take on a different form. We continue by discussing the process of designing and communicating the mission to the public, and also the universities' third mission, service to society, which is beginning to be more and more embraced by higher education. In the final sections of the paper we discuss the appropriateness of mission statements for higher education institutions, and offer future directions for universities, in order to better understand the concept and the way in which they can benefit from incorporating missions into their culture.

2. The Mission Concept

The mission of a higher education institution is seen as its main purpose, its *raison d'être* or the reason why the institution exists within a society (Paina and Băcilă, 2004; Bonewits Feldner, 2006; Woodrow, 2006). It is considered to be the foundation upon which the institution builds its vision or its strategic plans (Velcoff and Ferrari, 2006). Mission statements originate in the institution's internal environment, considering the needs of internal stakeholders, and are also shaped by environmental pressures and challenges that may affect the institution (James and Huisman, 2009). By creating an effective mission statement, the university communicates its philosophy, and the core competencies that will help achieve its purpose (Sidhu, 2003). Woodrow (2006: 316) suggests that an effective mission statement "should describe an organization's reason for existence by highlighting its priorities in a capacity that motivates all organizational constituents to embrace it and live it". Furthermore, a university's mission will communicate the institution's identity (Kosmützky, 2012), and what exactly the institution wants to accomplish within the society. This allows all the institution's stakeholders to fully understand its purpose, and also motivates them to embrace the mission, and to engage in activities that will lead towards the achievement of the institution's goals (Woodrow, 2006).

Moreover, a university's mission allows the institution to define its core activities, helps set priorities and reflects the institution's self-image and position in the educational market (Kosmützky, 2012). Morphew and Hartley (2006) suggest that mission statements can be a way of establishing institutional uniqueness, and for that matter could be used as a tool in institutional decision-making. A well-designed mission statement can significantly differentiate the institution from its competitors, and will lead to the optimization of the resources used in customer satisfaction (Finley, Rogers and Galloway, 2001). However, in order to have a positive impact on the institution's performance, mission statements must be carefully designed, and must clearly communicate the goals and standards (Fugazotto, 2009).

Although there is much support for the importance of a university's mission, its necessity and its role, the literature is also abundant in controversy regarding the usefulness of missions and mission statements. Many authors believe that universities today are building similar mission statements, which fail to identify an institution's particular strengths, and fail to differentiate or position the institution within the marketplace (Finley, Rogers and Galloway, 2001; Özdem, 2011; Kosmützky, 2012). Mission statements are believed to be long and complex, becoming too common to indicate what the institution really wishes to achieve. Furthermore, the language in mission statements is many times fairly general or vague, and is intended to evoke an all-purpose purpose (Morphew and Hartley, 2006), making it impossible to tell whether an institution actually achieves its goals or not. Moreover, critics argue that although missions should facilitate change and innovation within a university, many times there is no clear connection between the mission and the actions and decisions of the management (Weingart and Maasen, 2009). Sometimes universities all seem to follow the same strategy or their individual mission statement fails to define the institution's strategy (Finley, Rogers and Galloway, 2001). Jongbloed, Enders and Salerno (2008) argue that many higher education institutions tend to take on similar visions or ideals, and suggest the need for a greater responsibility on their part, being that every action they undertake will impact the institutions' stakeholders.

Whether they actually bring value to an organization or they are just a few lines that don't really say anything, for now, mission statements are still present within higher education institutions, and should not be cast aside. At least theoretically, missions hold a significant role, and that is to provide universities with a course of action, and to guide them towards fulfilling their purpose within society. Therefore, we believe it is important for universities to understand and accept that a well-designed mission forms the basis for any activity they may undertake.

3. Crafting and Sharing the Mission

Designing and formulating the mission statement falls into the task of the institution's management, and implies assessing the stakeholders' expectations, while considering the institution's current position and resources. The main issues for any university to consider when shaping its mission are the unique nature of educational institutions as not-for-profit organizations, the dynamic aspects of the environment and its impact on the institution, the process by which a mission emerges, and the role of the mission statement in the strategic planning process (Bingham, Quigley and Murray, 2001).

Generally, mission statements integrate three specific components: teaching, research and public service (Scott, 2006), which taken together should define the institution's structure, the expected outcomes and the terms for judging effectiveness, while also contributing to building organizational identity (Fugazzotto, 2009). A well articulated mission of any higher education institution should encompass four important elements (Brătianu, 2005; Peters and Waterman in Brătianu and Jianu, 2007): (1) general statement of the vision; (2) designation of the fundamental values of the university's management; (3) formulation of the institution's primary and strategic objectives; (4) consideration of the main stakeholders' interests and potential.

The university's vision refers to the ability of management to build the desired future (Kibuuka, 2001). It virtually conveys an ideal condition for the organization (Paina and Băcilă, 2004), captures its future perspectives, involves the institution's long term goals, as well as its desired market position (Özdem, 2011). Values represent a set of principles and beliefs that guide the way in which the institution aims to accomplish its mission (Kuenssberg, 2011). Based on a clear vision and strong values, a university can subsequently define its strategic objectives, which integrate the institution's growing potential and resources, while seeking to develop a competitive advantage (Paina and Băcilă, 2004).

Woodrow (2006: 317) identified a set of essential components that a higher education institution must take into account when designing its mission statement, in order to maximize the mission's impact:

- History – the institution must respect and appreciate its past, in order to be able to set out future goals;
- Educational philosophy – constituents should be able to read their institution's mission, and, as a result, understand its educational philosophy;
- Constituency – the university depends on its stakeholders, therefore they should be reflected in the mission statement. When an institution's stakeholders are unified behind its mission, they are more likely to embrace it, and live it;

- Institutional strength – mission statements should reflect an institution’s strengths, those items that differentiate it, and the activities that the institution carries out well;
- Uniqueness – the mission should differentiate the institution, build a strong image and a competitive advantage;
- Statement brevity – for mission statements to have an impact, they must be short and simple, and focus on what the institution wants to communicate;
- Precise words – language can be a powerful tool in highlighting an institution’s mission;
- Statements that endure – even though they can be subjected to reviews, mission statements should be designed in such a way so that they can serve the institution for a number of years;
- Breadth of communication – mission statements should be properly delivered to all the institution’s stakeholders.

Morphew and Hartley (2006) identified two potential benefits discussed in the literature for a clearly defined mission. First of all, it is instructional, helping organizational members to distinguish between activities that are instrumental to the institution, and others that are not. Second, it provides a shared sense of purpose, motivating the employees and other internal constituents to communicate the institution’s values to key external stakeholders. Therefore, educational institutions must pay great attention to the process of developing their mission, in order to accomplish the desired outcome, both internally, and externally.

After carefully crafting the mission statements, educational institutions must take the next step towards communicating their missions and sharing their values and goals with their publics. Only when the stakeholders become familiar with the institution’s values will they be able to share and support them, in this way contributing to achieving the institution’s goals. Acting as a communication tool, the mission reflects management’s vision of what the institution actually stands for, and impacts the institution’s employees (Desmidt and Prinzie, 2009), providing clear directions that define the appropriate course of action (Denison and Mishra, 1995). The employees must be familiar with the mission, understand why it is important, and how it will be applied (Paina and Băcilă, 2004), in order to be able to embrace it and to implement it in daily operations (Fugazzotto, 2009). For that matter, a connection can be established between an educational institution’s mission statement and its organizational performance (Desmidt and Prinzie, 2009; Fugazzotto, 2009).

The process of communicating the mission must be carried out both internally, and externally (Paina and Băcilă, 2004), towards all parties connected or involved with the institution’s activity. By presenting a well-defined mission, and sharing it with all stakeholders, higher education institutions are one step closer to achieving the desired position within the marketplace, and also to building lasting relationships and achieving institutional goals.

4. The Emerging Third Mission

Higher education institutions are generally defined as being not-for-profit organizations, which leads them to be involved and develop relationships with many more constituents than commercial organizations (Bingham, Quigley and Murray, 2001). Those constituents require a greater commitment that extends beyond

financial relations or fiscal responsiveness (Jongbloed, Enders and Salerno, 2008). The role that universities take on within a society is a significant one; therefore, mission statements increasingly emphasize their third dimension – service to society (Laredo, 2007; Jongbloed, Enders and Salerno, 2008; Montesinos et. al., 2008). The basic function of this third dimension of any mission refers to the knowledge transfer from the academic environment to the whole society, and it covers everything besides traditional teaching and research (Jongbloed, Enders and Salerno, 2008), from workshops, professional development courses, to establishing partnerships between educational institutions and the business community (Montesinos et. al., 2008).

Jongbloed, Enders and Salerno (2008: 307) view a university's mission as a reflection of how the institution outlines its contribution to society. In this regard, the authors suggest defining an institution's mission and vision by answering some existential questions:

- What is our business? – What should be our business?
- Who are our students? – Who should be our students?
- What is our environment? – What opportunities are there?
- What are our resources? – How should we deploy our assets?

These issues should be incorporated into the institution's activities and applied to the relationships that the institution has developed with its constituents, so that it can fulfill its role, and make a significant contribution to society (Alves, Mainardes and Raposo, 2010). Even the teaching and research activities are increasingly being asked to prove their contribution to the knowledge society (Jongbloed, Enders and Salerno, 2008), to the economic and social development.

Jongbloed, Enders and Salerno (2008) suggest that universities' third mission refers both to the knowledge transfer, and to the significant role that higher education institutions play within the community. The authors argue that universities are currently being evaluated by their constituents based on the commitment that they manifest in any relationship, and based on actions that attest to the institution's accountability. They also point out that the institution's involvement in society must be done through teaching and research, and not independent of these activities. Therefore, the third mission should ideally give rise to a wide variety of principles and strategies for economic and social development (Jongbloed, Enders and Salerno, 2008).

5. Discussion

Based on the topics approached in the sections above, we can argue that missions and mission statements are being regarded as an essential component of a university's strategy. Even though there are voices that look upon missions as being a waste of resources or simply not necessary, the fact that they are being used by education institutions everywhere, and also the attention paid to the mission concept by the literature supports the idea that there is more to missions than a simple succession of words and phrases. While it is true that many higher education institutions tend to develop similar missions, showing little diversity or distinctiveness, we believe that this is not a good enough reason to drop them, and just move on to strategy, as if they were never there.

Developing the strategy falls into the task of the institution's leadership, and the persons responsible for all the ongoing activities. In this process, they must consider a great deal of issues and constituents involved. Being a complex process, they tend to become overwhelmed with these issues, and pay little attention to crafting a strong mission statement, forgetting that it is the first essential step for a strategy to achieve its purpose. We support Bingham, Quigley and Murray (2001: 21), who argue that "properly conceived, mission driven strategic planning is contingency-based and externally driven". Mission statements reflect an institution's values, and what the institution actually stands for. If they are properly incorporated into the institution's strategy, they can provide a clear direction to approach the future and any changes that may occur, and also the means to deal with these changes.

Moreover, being that higher education institutions are by definition not-for-profit, they develop relationships with a great number of stakeholders. When carrying out their activities, they must consider for example also students' parents, alumni, local administrations, and others that may have a stake in the institutions' outcomes. It can be hard for universities to consider all these stakeholders when establishing their strategy and to acknowledge the fact that both the objectives they set, and the end results that they deliver must take into account stakeholders' interests. However, mission statements can provide a functional solution to this issue. If universities start by creating a culture and defining values that are community-oriented and incorporate these values into their mission statements, they will have a solid foundation upon which objectives can be built, and processes can be set in motion. The universities' employees must become familiar with the mission, so that they can further communicate it, and implement it in daily activities. In this regard, Desmidt and Prinzie (2009) argued that mission statements can be successful if they stimulate organizational members to (1) process the information embedded in the statement, and (2) to reach a joint understanding about the meaning of the information embedded in the mission statement. When this happens, and once all stakeholders get to know the institution's values, they will begin to share the mission as a common goal, and support its activities, in this way contributing to achieving institutional objectives.

It has long been argued in the literature that missions represent the foundation upon which institutions build their strategic plans, and that they should be the first step any institution takes before designing its strategy. From a marketing perspective, strategy refers to the guidelines that have been established for the marketing activity, and to the tools used by the organization to achieve its objectives (McDonald, 1998). The main purpose of any institution's strategy is to differentiate the institution, in this way acquiring and maintaining a favorable market position, compared to the competition (Gilligan and Wilson, 2009). To accomplish this, higher education institutions can start by carefully designing their mission, in order to build a strong identity, and to convey a well defined set of values to their publics (Paina and Băcilă, 2004). This can be a good way to differentiate the institution and establish a strong market position.

Moreover, if we explore even further the relationship between mission and strategy, we can positively account for a link between these concepts and the institution's performance. By creating a competitive advantage, marketing strategy will lead to increased performance and superior outcomes of the institution. Based on this, we argue that a well designed and conceived mission statement will lead to superior

performance, by guiding the implementation of strategy, and motivating all stakeholders to work towards the accomplishment of a common goal.

Considering the issues discussed above, we believe that missions and mission statements still represent an important component for any higher education institution, influencing strategy, and offering a proper course of action for institutions when faced with change. If the mission statement has been properly conceived, the institution should always find in it a clear direction for future times. University management holds the responsibility and important task of developing both the mission, and strategy of the institution; therefore, we support greater involvement in this process, given the great benefits that could be obtained. It may not always be an easy task, due to time and resources necessary, be they material, financial or human. Nevertheless, missions should not be ignored, and just stated so that they exist, they should clearly express the institution's values, and what it wants to accomplish. The institution's employees are the second group that holds a lot of responsibility in making sure the mission is successful. They need to make an effort to understand the mission, implement it in their daily activities, and communicate it further to the public. All this will lead to a common involvement from all stakeholders in the institution's plans, a strong and competitive market position, and superior performance for the institution.

6. Future Lines of Research

We have argued in this paper that mission statements hold the foundation for effectively designing and implementing an institution's strategy, which will lead to the achievement of institutional goals, and thus superior performance. In this regard, we believe it would be beneficial to examine more closely the link between mission, strategy, and performance. Missions are defined in the literature according to dimensions like teaching, research, and community service. Other approaches consider the vision, values, and objectives components. One way to explain this link would be to encompass the aspects mentioned above into a scale that defines an institution's mission, in order to analyze the impact of these components on the institution's strategy and performance. We believe that by offering a model that explains this link, educational managers would be provided with evidence that supports the importance of mission statements, and the benefits that could be gained by addressing this aspect thoroughly.

Another avenue for future research would be to examine mission statements, and the conformity of a university's actions with the stated guidelines. It would be interesting to investigate whether differences exist between types of institutions, be they business or non-business, public or private, vocational or traditional.

We acknowledge the fact that different aspects of the environment, both internal, and external, can have a powerful influence over the formulation and implementation of mission statements. Identifying these aspects could prove to be valuable, and could offer guidelines in understanding the whole process of crafting a mission. We support both the analysis of factors that may hinder mission formulation and implementation, and of those that facilitate these processes, in order to give a complete picture of the influence of environmental aspects on the application of mission statements in universities, and maybe even on their strategy and performance.

The avenues for future research suggested so far fail to address the sharing of the mission with the institution's stakeholders. This comes as a result of the fact that the majority of studies on organizational mission emphasize the communication of mission statements (Bonewits Feldner, 2006). We fully support the importance of communicating and delivering the mission to the institution's public, but we believe that addressing other steps of the process would also prove to be useful. Research could begin with the formulation of mission statements. Who is actually involved during this stage? How exactly does the mission statement arise? Is it following a brainstorming or is it something typed up in a hurry by managers or by somebody else? Do the persons that draft the mission statement follow any guidelines, go through specific steps, or do they just write a sequence of words and hope they sound good enough? Are the dimensions that define mission statements (i.e. vision, values, and institutional objectives) fully integrated or the institution does not quite consider this?

Not casting the communication process fully aside, we believe it could be useful to establish whether the communication of the mission statements achieves its purpose among the institution's stakeholders. Their perceptions of the institution through the mission statement could provide managers with great insights, and could offer potential for future improvement. Addressing all the above-mentioned issues would form a solid basis for further research. In theory, we always assume that things are being done a certain way, and proceed to prospective research accordingly. Actually knowing how things are done would help researchers in finding the best way to approach specific topics, and would provide the results with greater value.

Acknowledgement: This work was possible with the financial support of the Sectoral Operational Programme for Human Resources Development 2007-2013, co-financed by the European Social Fund, under the project number POSDRU/107/1.5/S/76841 with the title "Modern Doctoral Studies: Internationalization and Interdisciplinarity".

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