An Experimental Analysis on the Corporate Identity of Institutes of Higher Learning in the Malaysian East Coast Region Vis-À-Vis Market Conditions in Empowering Self-Sustainability

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Abstract: The liberalization of the education industry has exposed the institutes of higher learning (IHL) in Malaysia to financial challenges. Without good financial standing, public institutions will rely on government funding. Ostensibly, this contradicts with the government's aspiration to make universities self-sufficient. With stiff competition from private institutes of higher learning, IHL need to be prepared at the forefront level. The corporate identity itself is the entrance to the world of higher learning and it is in this uniqueness, it will be able to distinguish itself from competitors. Effective corporate identity representation of the IHL is very important for the sustainability of the institution. This study employed in-depth interview with key personnel and decision makers of the IHL. The IHL in the east coast region of Malaysia has been chosen as the location for the research due to its rising prominence as an education hub especially with the establishment of East Coast Economic Region (ECER). The market conditions elements in the Corporate Identity Model developed by Melewar and Jenkins in 2002 has been used as the primary research framework. The result highlights the readiness of each IHL in the east coast region in competing with other well established IHL all over Malaysia despite the increase of financial challenges. Some of the strategies used to promote and establish their corporate identities are proven to be efficient and cost effective which could be emulated especially by new IHL.

Keywords:Communication, corporate identity, market conditions, IHL

I. INTRODUCTION

The institutes of higher learning (IHL) in Malaysia need to prepare itself in gearing up for the challenges of market liberalisation and globalisation.

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These two phenomena have significantly changed the way business is conducted in the education sector. Although the arrival of international universities and the setting of its offshore campus locally provide more choice, it derails the institutes of higher learning's market pool. Universities and other IHL have to compete with each other to attract high quality students and academic staff of international level. Hence, competition is no longer limited to national borders (Mohamad, 2007). Not only that, the Malaysian Education Ministry's aspiration to make public universities self-sufficient without having to rely on the government funding has made it explicitly arduous tasks for the public universities to thrive. Therefore, the need for a strong branding and corporate identity is highly significant as it provides the first impression of the IHL. The IHL in the east coast are chosen to provide them with competitive edge over their counterparts in the west coast.

For a variety of reasons, both academic and business interests in corporate identity have increased significantly in recent years. Organisations have realised that a strong identity can help them align with the marketplace, attract investment, motivate employees and serve as a means to differentiate their products and services. Thus, many organisations are striving to develop a distinct and recognisable identity (Melewar and Karaosmanoglu, 2005).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

"The term "corporate identity" evolved from undertakings in the area of marketing, primarily in areas such as corporate visual identity systems, which are used to represent the organisational values and mission to the outside world. Knowing that a strong identity has a number of potential benefits for an organisation - e.g. adding value to increasingly similar products, generating consumer confidence and loyalty, stimulating investments, attracting high-quality personnel and breeding employee motivation (e.g. Balmer, 1995; Fombrun and Shanley, 1990,; Olins, 1989; van Riel, 1995; van Riel and Balmer, 1997)" in (Melewar and Jenkins, 2002: p78).

Corporate identity is important because it summarises the organisation thoroughly.

Identity is now widely recognised as an effective instrument and a means to achieve competitive advantage (Schmidt, 1995). Although the business model for IHL mainly revolves around the enrolment of the undergraduate and postgraduate students, it should not ignore the importance of other elements which constitute the formation of the IHL itself; the research elements as well as industry relations. These two components also stimulate the growth and reputation of the IHL. With good reputation, then only IHL could align and promote itself to the industry and potential investors. A strong corporate identity provides such needs for the IHL to strategically map itself in the market to ensure good investment and great reputation.

Market conditions involve the nature of the industry and marketing strategy. The Malaysian higher education market is crowded and competitive. The general rule in the market is that prospective students will often choose to enroll at a leading university because of its overall reputation, even though it may be relatively weak in the specific subject chosen (Mohamad, 2007). Corporate and marketing strategies not only determine desired future states of the organization but they also influence the formation of brand and corporate perceptions. Thus, the way an organization defines its corporate strategies has a significant impact on how it is perceived by its stakeholders (Mohamad, 2007).

(i)Research Questions:

a)What are the elements that contribute to market conditions among IHL in the east coast region?

b)What is the niche area of the IHL in the east coast region in relation to market demands?

c)What are the current uses of corporate/marketing strategies in IHL in the east coast region?

(ii)Objectives of the Research:

a) To determine the elements of market conditions among IHL in the east coast region.

b) To assess the corporate identity with the market demands among IHL in the east coast region.

c) To investigate the current use of corporate / marketing strategies among IHL in the east coast region.

III. METHODOLOGY

The research design for this study was qualitative methodology and conducted in the form in-depth interviews with stakeholders. Research interview questions were derived from the three research questions attempted to be answered by this research. Variables from each research questions were identified and aided in the formulation of these interview questions. In total, 19 questions were asked during each interview session. Interview answers were transcribed and coded. Later on, the identified variables aforementioned were turned into themes and researchers manually search for the themes in the coded transcriptions. The study was conducted at the public Institutes of Higher Learning in the east coast region of Malaysia namely Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) and Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP). In-depth interviews were conducted to a number of three informants among IHL's policy makers or top management.

IV. RESULTS AND INTEPRETATION

The qualitative data was gathered through in depth interviews for three institutions; Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) and Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP). The interview session with UniSZA involved one interviewee, i.e. the Director of Corporate Communication & International Relations from UniSZA, providing the input and information and UMP was represented by two senior officers. Meanwhile, the Assistant Deputy Vice Chancellor from UMK was interviewed.

The coding for the said interviews were further categorised into four main themes which support the elements prescribed in Melewar & Jenkin's corporate identity model; 1) Nature of Industry and 2) Corporate / Marketing Strategies. The four themes are adaptation, information seeking, problem solving, and elements. To probe further into the corporate identity model, adaptation and elements were the themes used to identify the nature of industry. For corporate / marketing strategies, the themes were adaptation, information seeking and problem solving. These four themes were identified based on the frequencies and keywords that existed across all four interview transcripts. Adaptation was chosen asthe first theme as it ties in very clearly with the nature of industry that these three universities operated on.

Adaptation, for this theme is defined as how the concerned institutions adapt and adopt to its surrounding in ensuring its visibility locally or to some extent, abroad. Adaptation also means what are the stakeholders that contributed to the overall success of image building to these institutions. The second theme, information seeking is defined as how do stakeholders utilise the available mass communication channel to search for information of the institutions. Similarly, the second theme also investigates further into the activities held by these three universities in capturing its intended audiences through selected media and the reasons for such selection. Problem solving has been identified as the third theme in assisting the analysis of the interview. The operational definition used for problem solving mainly focusing at how the universities operate under challenging financial environment while at the same time competing in the crowded higher education marketplace. Clearly, the data obtained from all interviews contributed to the second element in Melewar & Jenkin's corporate identity model; corporate / marketing strategies. The last but equally important theme is elements that constitute the overall corporate identity of these three universities. As broad as it can be, the definition of elements for the purpose of this research is narrowed to observe how the mission and vision of the university are translated into visual or activities that contributed to the sustainability of the universities concerned.

To guide in the probing of the nature of industry and corporate / marketing strategies, the research used the three research questions and each of these research questions are further strengthened by three or four more sub questions. These questions served as amainframe and guideline during the interview sessions. The details are discussed in the following sections.
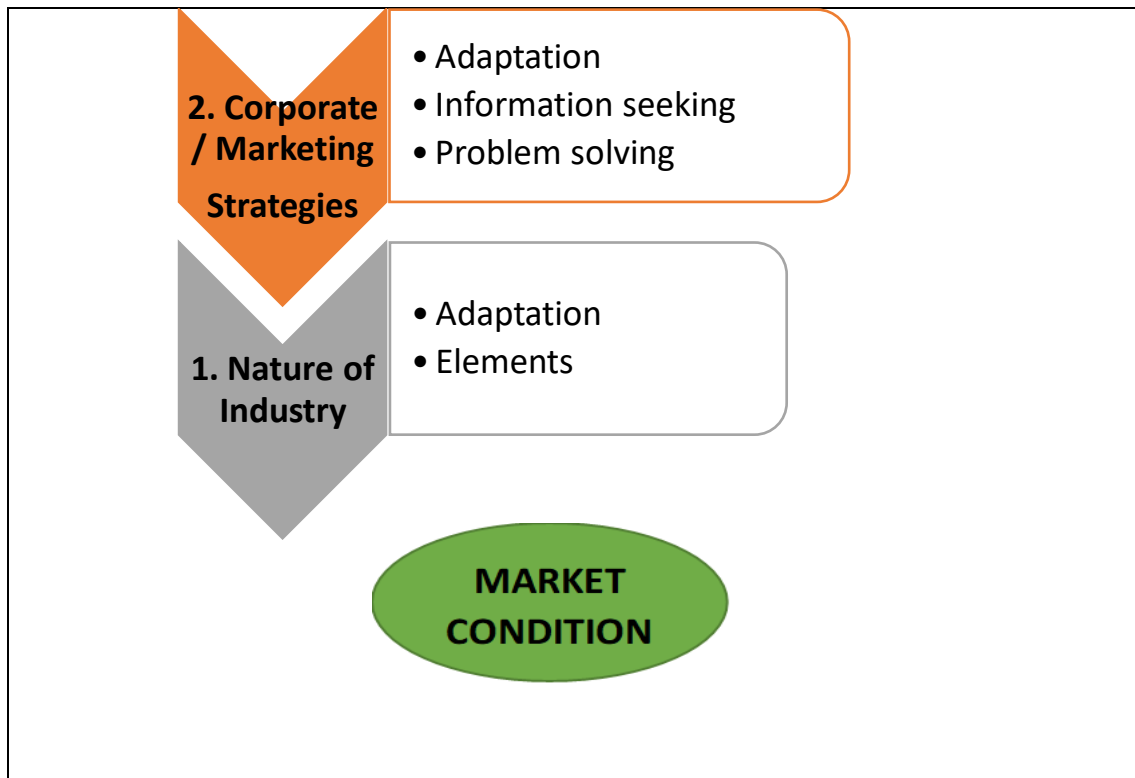
Fig. 1 Conceptual framework for Corporate Identity of IHL in the east coast region.

Analysis of Research Question 1 & 2

1. RQ1: What are the elements that contribute to market conditions among IHL in the east coast region?
2. RQ 2: What is the niche area of the IHL in the east coast region in relations to market

   demands?

This section presents the findings and analysis of the qualitative data achieved from the in depth interviews conducted with informants representing three different institutions; UniSZA, UMK and UMP. Their feedback echoed the intention and strategies which was meant to address the market conditions and how the university cope with changes from and within the university.

The first and second research questions are combined in findings as it mirrors the reflective aspect of the mission and vision of the university and how it contributed to its readiness. Reading together both research questions, the outlines themes are better explained where it clearly describes the connectedness and importance for the corporate communication department to materialise the university's mission and vision. It was discovered that all universities make sure that it adapts to the need of the society around it as well as ensuring the niche that has been put forth by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) is implemented.

Juggling with these two needs also means that these universities need to have a sense of communicative affordability to reach out its constituencies; internal and external. UniSZA stated that it is the platform to bring the communities together with the university and to strive in the name of Allah. Through this, the effort will also be a tool to reach out as a means for 'da'wah' or propagation. That is

what UniSZA wants; to get connected with community while at the same time ensuring its niche is kept intact.

Meanwhile for UMK, it strives to adapt to the environment. The informant stressed on the importance to increase the university's visibility first since UMK is still considered to be a new university. The public must be constantly exposed to the university and so far it has shown good progress in terms of awareness about UMK. As for UMP, although the informant stated that there are no competitor from other institutes of higher learning, the adaptation is highly significant as it ties back to the two attributes governing the market conditions; nature of industry, and corporate / marketing strategies. In the case of UMP, it is clear that Kuantan has been the focal point for heavy industry and UMP's presence through its niche area in engineering and technology fulfils the market needs and conveniently adapts to both the environment and niche market.

Analysis of Research Question 3

3. RQ3: What are the current uses of corporate/marketing strategies in IHL in the east coast region?

The third research question (RQ3) addresses the tools and the implementation of the corporate/marketing strategies of the IHL in the east coast region. RQ3 is directly related to the second attribute governing the Market Condition in Melewar & Jenkin's Corporate Identity Model; corporate / marketing strategies. The analysis shows that problem solving has been identified as the theme that provides the correlation form one informant to another.

For RQ3, there were three subsets of questions used to probe into the corporate/marketing strategies and it has been revealed that all the institutions leverage on these strategies as a tool to solve problems in the aspect of marketing, combating misinformation, and building perceptions. Informant from UMK expressively highlighted that finance is the main issue as far as corporate / marketing strategies are concerned.

The plan to elevate UMK corporate / marketing strategies were hampered by the additional budget cut which saw a large portion of university's budget being channeled to the new campus development and facilities upgrade. Nevertheless, the informant stressed that the corporate / marketing strategies blueprint for UMK is still intact and the plan will be carried despite fiscal challenges. The activities and promotions would be carried out but with cautious and strict adherence to prudent spending.

Further to that, one of the counter measures the informant and his department made to address the shortage of funding was to closely collaborate with industrial partners especially in Kelantan. The emphasis is given to programmes that could leverage with the need of the industries. To date, UMK have nineteen academic programmes which have been creativelty designed to ensure 40% industrial participation and 60% academic input. The informant from UniSZA also seemed to have the same strategies employed by UMK where the fiscal challenges are concerned. This is because the MOHE in the 2016 budget had significantly reduced the budget for all universities in Malaysia by 5% to 20%. UniSZA too must be able to sufficiently and creatively manage its resources. The measurement of sustainanbility for UniSZA could be seen through its focus on prominentprogramme that other universities in the east coast region do not have such as medicine and health sciences.

Although there are branch campuses from other public universities in the east coast region, the informant stated that for a university with main campus, UniSZA is the sole institution to offer medicine and health sciences programme. Moreover, Terengganu will have a new landmark as the federal government has approved UniSZA to set up its own teaching hospital which will cater the needs of the people as well as supplement the existing general hospital in Kuala Terengganu, Sultanah Nur Zahirah Hospital. From this, the informant further stated that the corporate / marketing strategies will serve dual purposes; not only providing medical doctors, specialists and surgeons, it will also leverage the privileges in every promotional activity. Apart from that, the researchers from UniSZA too have greatly contributed to the development and entrepneurship activities among the people of Terengganu with the assistance from the state government.

One prime example that the informant gave was the commercialisation of the Terengganu signature dish; "nasi dagang". The product is called T'Dagang which involved three parties; a local entrepreneur, UniSZA, and the state government. Researchers from UniSZA pioneered the T'Dagang product in the research development meanwhile the state government through Yayasan Pembangunan Ushawan Terengganu (YPU) managed the budget and promotion. When the product is sold and launched, it directly served as effective corporate / marketing strategies for UniSZA and deliberately aims to solve issues pertaining public perception of the university due to its long association with religious-based programmes.

Through the T'Dagang product, the community would now see UniSZA as a whole new entity and further re-align people's perspective and expectation of UniSZA's corporate image and identity. The last corporate/marketing strategy that UniSZA employed was to specifically address the lack of news coverage in the mainstream media. The informant stated that the university has employed the practitioner from media agency to work at the university and this would ensure constant networking and provide added advantage as to preferred treatment that UniSZA did not have previously. The immediate result so far has been positive whereby the coverage was good and it was proven when the Media Night Gala organised by the university to appreciate the members of the media received good attendance.

Meanwhile the informant from UMP explained that the university also leveraged its MBA Engineering niche as part of the main corporate /marketing strategy to align with the market condition in Pahang. The respondent further explained that from the branding standpoint, once the programme is in line with the university's niche area, it will be a lot easier to ensure people to identify the university and easier to align with the university's corporate identity. Through this tactic, the desired result that UMP looks for is the word of mouth by the stakeholders and this will make it compatible when the UMP team is out for marketing exercises because the reputation is already recognised by the people. Another similar initiative undertook by UMP is that it too organises activities with the media to show appreciation while at the same time cushion some effects in terms of favour and positive coverage. Activities such as bowling tournaments, "durian" feasts, "Hari Raya" celebration are among annual activities organised by the UMP to cater for the members of the media. As for UMP, it solely depends on the university's strategic plan; (1) academic quality, (2) income generation, (3) research, and (4) branding. To ensure consistency throughout the university's many departments and units, the corporate communication department ensures that any communication and information disseminated to the public, must meet if not all, at least one of the university's strategic plan.

This becomes a strategic thrust for UMP and also to ensure its target aware of UMP uniqueness. Another activity that UMP is consistently involved in is corporate social responsibility activities where it has been able to create preferences and attract people in Pahang especially towards the university that highlights on branding.

V. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study has shed light on the readability of these three each coast IHL in taking their games up to international level. It has successfully determined the elements prescribed in Melewar & Jenkin's corporate identity model; 1) Nature of Industry and 2) Corporate/Marketing Strategies among these three IHL in the east coast region.

By aligning their niche with the national needs, specifically in the east coast

region, these three IHL can be seen as complementing each other rather than competing as each focus on different specialisations. UniSZA as the third Islamic university in Malaysia and the only one in the east coast region aspires to produce more graduates who not only excel in academic but also possess deep-rooted Islamic identity. UMK on the other hand, specialises in moulding of more business-minded graduates with its industrial-based curriculum designs and has established itself as an industrial-focused IHL.

Interestingly, although all of these IHL adapt to the local needs, their marketing strategies are meant for international markets. The borderless world of the Internet as well as efficient use of the media has satisfactorily helped to etch and strengthen the image of these three institutes of higher learning.Amidst the current economic uncertainties with tight budgets, each IHL is always looking for effective methods to promote their institution both locally and internationally. Among the corporate/marketing strategies adopted are smart-partnerships with the industry players, commercialisation, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes apart from maintaining clear vision and mission to present their identities. All these can be seen from the four themes extracted from the interview findings with all three IHL; adaptation, information seeking, problem solving, and elements.

From this research, the readiness of each IHL in the east coast region in competing with other well established IHL all over Malaysia despite the challenging financial situation is remarkably positive. Some of the strategies used to promote and establish their corporate identities are proven to be efficient and cost effective can be emulated especially by new IHL. It would be interesting to see further research on not only IHL in the east coast region but also other parts in Malaysia. Comparative studies between public and private IHL are other promising areas of study.

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