

**Marketing Strategy in Higher Education: Deans' /Pro Vice-Chancellors'  
Leadership of Marketing Strategy within UK Business Schools**

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## **Marketing Strategy in Higher Education: Deans' /Pro Vice-Chancellors' Leadership of Marketing Strategy within UK Business Schools**

### **Summary**

This empirical paper examines the management competences and leadership of marketing, which Deans at UK Business School demonstrate. This study builds on Spendlove's (2007) study and concentrates on the leadership of the strategic marketing in relation to the positioning of the faculty/school. The study comprised ten semi-structured interviews with Deans/PVCs from pre and post 92 UK Business Schools.

The study revealed that there was little difference in the perceptions of leadership between Deans from post and pre 92 institutions. However, Deans from pre 92 institutions felt that they were concentrating more time on leading strategy than Deans from post 92 institutions were spending. The results also suggested that Deans had a good understanding and grasp of marketing concepts regardless of their own subject areas but had not received much formal training or development in marketing strategy.

This paper adds to the debate about leaders in HE and the development of their marketing competences and/or pure leadership skills. One of the key implications for management in HE is the potential requirement for Deans/PVCs to be skilled in leading a down-sizing strategy rather than growth in Business Schools.

**Keywords:** Business Schools, Marketing Strategy, Competencies, Positioning

## **Introduction**

The current Leadership in Higher Education literature tends to concentrate on the role of Vice-Chancellors (Spendlove, 2007; Bargh, Boccock, Scott and Smith, 2000; O'Meara and Petzall, 2007) and general academic leadership (Muijs, Harris, Lumby, Morrison and Sood, 2006; Frenkel, Schechtman and Koenigs, 2006; Middlehurst, 1993; Stensaker, 1999; Aasen and Stensaker, 2007; Martin and Marion, 2005; Thompson and Harrison, 2000; Osseo-Asare, Longbottom and Murphy, 2005 and Rowley, 1997). There is very little literature which considers the marketing competences of senior leaders of Business Schools (Davies and Thomas, 2009).

The political and economic environment in the UK has required senior HE leaders to manage their faculties like a business with the devolution of financial budgets and the impact of returns on investment (Thompson and Harrison, 2000, Martin and Marion, 2005). Indeed, the Association of Business Schools (ABS) aims to equip through programmes of CPD Business School Deans with a better understanding of financial management, perceptions of their school, the positioning in the market and an understanding of the performance of competitors (ABS, 2008) which links to the University's marketing strategy.

Davies and Thomas (2009), state that the positioning of British Business Schools has been changing, which has an impact on the Dean's ability to contribute significantly to the university's senior management team. Indeed, David and Thomas (2009, pg 1401) go on to suggest that Deans manage a range of organisational dilemmas such as "creating a full service school v. niche position, producing academic research excellent publications v. practitioner demands for immediate relevance, allocating financial expenditure on research stars v. visiting lectures, or investments in new buildings v. students as co-producers and so on. Personal dilemmas are also common".

This aim of this paper is to report on an empirical scoping study, building on Spendlove's (2007) study, which identifies the competences of Deans, within UK Business Schools, and their leadership of the strategic marketing positioning of their faculty/school. The comparison between Deans in post and pre 92 institutions (post 92 institutions were previously polytechnics and colleges of higher education and so

have less experience as ‘independent institutions, having been previous under the control and direction of local education authorities, in the HE sector than pre 92 institutions and they are generally less research intensive) will also be considered as there are often differing management styles and objectives, relating to research and teaching, set by the top Senior Management team within such institutions. Thus this will make an interesting contribution to the discussion.

The study investigates the competences (attitudes, knowledge and behaviours) which are needed for effective leadership of marketing strategy in higher education in UK Business Schools. It explores two areas; leadership competences and approaches to leading marketing, focusing on strategic positioning.

### **Theoretical Frameworks: Perspectives of Academic Leadership**

There is a wealth of literature relating to the field of leadership from different disciplines and perspectives, including general management literature (Peters and Waterman, 1982; Mintzberg, 1979) and education literature (Middlehurst, 1993 and 1999).

Hesburgh, (1988), identifies an academic leader as someone who requires a clear vision, is a good communicator and is able to motivate colleagues, keeping focused and staying on course optimistically. Other authors (Wolf, 1990; Middlehurst, 1993) argue that academic leaders need to be very creative. This sentiment is echoed by leading marketing academics (Argyriou, Leeflang, Saunders and Verhoef, 2008), who state that understanding the ‘customer’ and being creative in producing original and exciting, leading approaches for offerings is paramount to an organisation’s success.

However, Rowley, (1997) argues that leadership can be influenced by factors such as the faculty’s stage of development, the academic discipline area and its standing/size within the organisation, the senior manager’s personal style and the specific management function such as Dean, Executive Dean, Pro Vice-Chancellor. She goes on to identify that, typically, the senior academic manager’s strategic leadership requires the creation and taking forward of visions relating to future market position and reputation management, which includes the creation of culture, systems and shared values, (assuming that there is not an imposed hierarchical control of culture).

Much of the literature considers traits and competences (see Middleshurst, 1993; Rowley, 1997). Traits relate to the personal characteristics of leaders such as intelligence, initiative, self-assurance and the helicopter trait (grasping the complexity of situations at different levels of detail).

However, research has moved on to consider leadership competences (Spendlove, 2007; Bartram, 2005; Tubbs and Schultz, 2005) and these relate to knowledge, skills, abilities and behaviours. The ABS (2008) recently investigated traits of a group of senior managers in HE (over 50 Deans and PVCs) from pre and post 92 universities (previously polytechnics) in the UK (60% were from post 92 institutions). This study explored Deans' perceptions of the challenges they were currently facing and would be facing by 2012. They were asked to rank a list of 45 leadership related personal characteristics. Table 1 identifies the outcomes from this study.

**Table 1 – Top 20 qualities of Business School Deans (ABS, 2008)**

<b>Top 20 characteristics currently</b>	<b>Top 20 characteristics in 2012</b>
Strategic Leadership	Strategic Leadership
Communication skills	Leading change
Leading change	Communication skills
Political skills	Political skills
Ability to develop relationships	Ability to develop relationships
External networking	External networking
Trust	Focus on results
Self-awareness	Performance improvement
Creating energy	Creating energy
Encouraging innovation	Encouraging innovation
Focus on results	Strategic alliances
Providing encouragement	Focus on the bottom line
Performance improvement	Innovation
Student focus	Managing risk
Conflict resolution	Resource management
Resource management	Talent management
Reducing time on valueless activity	International contacts
Team working	Trust
Managing risk	Self-awareness
Academic credibility	Student focus

Some interesting changes in the importance order of these traits can be identified and this was explored further during the empirical stage of this study. The ABS study also identified the perceptions of Deans as a shaping agent (see table 2). The research explored four terms: leader; diplomat; juggler and fixer and likened them to specific metaphors which aided the imagery of the role. Here it was noted that the view of

Deans as shapers was inconsistent and so these terms were also investigated during the empirical stage of this study. The ABS study also suggested that performance orientation would become more important for senior leadership at Dean level and that collegiality would reduce. The ABS report concluded that having a personal strong track record in teaching and/or research was not enough for future Deans.

**Table 2 – Imagery for Deans (ABS, 2008)**

<b>Summary term</b>	<b>Metaphors</b>
Leader (Strategist)	Statesman, Director, Charismatic
Diplomat (Negotiator)	Networker, politically astute, skilful negotiator
Juggler (Manager)	Plate spinner, tight rope walker, illusionist
Fixer (Bureaucrat)	Engineer, Worker Bee, Gopher, Car Mechanic

Spendlove’s (2007) study concurs with the ABS study and concludes that there are differing views on the perceptions of leadership at senior level in HE. However, there was consensus that academic leadership was fundamentally different to business leadership, thus different competencies and experiences were required to perform effectively.

As there appears to be a dearth of literature which specifically relates to senior management leadership traits at the Dean/PVC level in relation to the leadership of the strategic positioning of a faculty/school, this study aimed to explore this phenomenon and to contribute to this area of marketing leadership in HE.

### **Methodology**

A qualitative approach was undertaken to explore this research question and to explore the behavioural characteristics of Deans in the leadership of the positioning of their Business School. A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with Deans within ten UK universities, which was representative of the sector (i.e. within both pre and post 92 Universities). The respondents (all male) were drawn from a sample of Deans/PVC responsible for leading Business Schools or Business and Management faculties, half who had previously been Heads of Departments and the other half came from other Business academic ‘disciplines’.

Four of the respondents were at the end of their tenure as Dean and two had just commenced their Dean's role within the last 12 months. The Dean's characteristics and the Dean's imagery from the ABS (2008) study were explored during the interviews. The semi-structured interview protocol was tested with two PVCs and adjustments were made where appropriate. Each interview was tape recorded and lasted between one and a half to three hours. The tapes were transcribed verbatim and anonymity was guaranteed. Template analysis was undertaken to identify new themes in leadership and strategic positioning. These themes were categorised and this was used as a coding grid for the data to determine the frequency of each theme from the transcripts.

### **Results: Individual Backgrounds**

*Industrial Experience* - The majority of the respondents called on their previous employment background in industry for a marketing or business related area, and stated that they had gained leadership skills and resilience from this industry experience. One had Armed Forces training and this had been instrumental in developing the respondent's personal traits and leadership style. One respondent explained that his political background helped him tremendously in networking and forging links with senior government officials. There were more Deans from pre 92 universities, who had not had backgrounds in industry before entering into their academic roles. However, it could be argued that industry backgrounds, which are outside of the academic arena, may not be important when considering the experience and training opportunities for such a career – but it is interesting to observe this phenomenon.

*Academic Experience* – At Dean level, all had substantial experience in terms of managing previous academic departments and budgets varying from £ £11 million - £34 million per annum within their role. Many stated that they had developed much of their leadership style through observing excellent role models (and also poor leaders) and making mistakes. Most had either been allocated, or solicited by themselves, an academic mentor who was either within their university or external at a senior level. Often the mentor was a PVC or a DVC (Deputy Vice Chancellor).

**Leadership Training** – half of the respondents stated that they had not received formal management or leadership training. Most felt that training was not an effective method of developing leadership skills and many respondents felt that their ability to network with other Deans (internally and externally) was extremely important in developing their understanding and in eliciting useful ideas. Most had strong academic backgrounds in terms of achieving their own PhD qualification, MBA qualifications and research profile – although they acknowledged that these areas were not necessarily helpful in developing leadership skills for HE.

### **The Dean's Role – An Academic or Manager?**

All the respondents were Executive Academic Deans and three also held concurrent PVC roles. The fixed term contracts were found in pre 92 institutions only and there was a personal concern that extending senior roles longer would damage the individual's academic research profile (which was not seen to be acceptable). Within post 92 institutions, the respondents had permanent Dean's contracts; however, they were also worried about maintaining their personal research record (which was also echoed in Spence's 2007 study). Many talked about not being able to complete research whilst undertaking their Dean's role, and others talked about using their own personal weekends (regularly) to keep up with their personal research profile. All respondents felt that their role was extremely demanding as a manager and did not leave time to be an 'academic' in the working week. There appeared to be a clear conflict and struggle which seemed to be more pronounced for the post 92 institution respondents.

### **Leadership Competences**

Respondents were asked to identify their own views about their personal leadership competences (unprompted) and their response was wide and varied – which did not necessarily concur with the ABS (2008) study. Vision, communication, enthusiasm, listening, political, networking were commonly cited. Skills such as 'keeping your head' and 'not letting things fester' were cited by about a third of the respondents. Analytical and innovative approaches to management were expressed as being very important by two respondents. Indeed, most respondents alluded to the fact that 'things were becoming very tight' and that financial astuteness would be of paramount importance within the next few years. One respondent postulated that



Deans would need to develop a new set of skills to manage the down sizing of faculties/schools because of the political and economic climate facing HE. However, others disputed that notion and felt that HE was still in a period of growth and this would continue for a while – for the very same reasons cited previously (looking at the counter argument).

Most respondents agreed with the ABS top five qualities of Business School Deans (see Table 1) now and in the future; however, all but one were very unsure why student focus and trust had dropped to a lower predicted ranking for 2012. All respondents regardless of background (i.e. marketing or non marketing, post or pre 92) were convinced that student focus was and would become even more important following the Government's review of student fees and potential increase from £3,000 to a minimum of £5,000 per annum. Many substantiated this point by considering the importance of league tables based on student satisfaction. This was quite surprising given that many of the respondents from pre 92 institutions did not receive the majority of their faculty's income from teaching related activities. However, this response seems to indicate that Dean's are (as much as in their control) very concerned with teaching and learning issues.

### **Leadership Shaping Role**

All respondents were asked to rank their time in relation to the shaping roles identified in the ABS study.

**Table 3**  
**Imagery for Deans as stated by respondents based on ABS study**

Summary term	Pre 92 Respondents percentage						Post 92 Respondents percentage					
						AVE						AVE
<b>Leader</b>	40	40	60	40	20	40%	25	10	50	40	25	30%
<b>Diplomat</b>	30	30	20	30	40	30%	45	20	10	25	45	29%
<b>Juggler</b>	10	25	10	20	10	15%	20	35	20	15	10	20%
<b>Fixer</b>	20	5	10	10	30	15%	10	15**	20	20	20	17%

\*\* Respondent added a further 20% to ‘Academic’ role which he identified as being able to undertake research (in own time).

The AVE box indicates the average percentage score for each term.

The data in Table 3 indicates that respondents from pre 92 institutions see their role as more of a leader and strategist and this is not the case for those in post 92 institutions. The discussion around this debate seemed to indicate that these respondents saw themselves as ‘academic’ leaders more than ‘faculty’ leaders and this had an impact on their perceptions relating to improving quality ratings for the faculty research also (such as the UK Research Assessment Exercise).

### **Risk Control and Empowerment**

Most respondents from post 92 universities were happy to report that they had a lot of power and control in managing and leading their institution. Only about half of the respondents from pre 92 institutions felt the same. Many respondents stated that this varied over time and the Vice Chancellor’s and Governing Body’s response to the economic climate had had an impact on their ability/freedom to determine direction, management and lead.

### **Leading Marketing Strategy at Faculty/School Level**

*Positioning of the Faculty/School* - Although the job descriptions for Deans of Business Schools did not include the requirement to position the faculty or business school, all respondents were able to articulate their perception of the positioning of their faculty. However, the level of understanding of the concept of positioning varied between respondents. The Deans with marketing backgrounds were, in the main, able to discuss the approach to segmentation and positioning and how this had

been developed under their leadership. Interestingly, this also appeared to be the case for Deans with non-marketing backgrounds. Indeed, it appeared that some of the respondents with non-marketing backgrounds, (but from post 92 institutions) seemed to have worked harder in developing a positioning strategy for their faculty/business school, which included the refining of a corporate identity; linking an internal and external communications plan together to formalise the positioning and also aligning the programmes offered within the institution to this positioning. About a third of the respondents had developed new faculty/business school positioning statements (within the last few years) which linked to their overall faculty mission and the University values. The evidence seems to indicate that a specialist background in marketing was not a prerequisite for the ability to effectively lead the strategic positioning of the faculty or school.

***Market share and Data for Marketing Decisions*** – most respondents did not see the value of exploring market share for their programmes, and this was found mainly in pre 92 institutions (from those with marketing backgrounds). Whilst at first sight this may appear surprising, the expressed reasoning behind this assertion was related to the UK government's capping of funding for student numbers. However, some post 92 respondents did identify that there was possibility of growth in international markets and development of commercial programmes (neither of which are dependent on current and future Government funding currently in the UK).

Most institutions had market data systems which offered the gathering and analysing of data for the Dean. However, it was found that this was compiled from a variety of methods. Some respondents said market data was prepared for them from Management Information Systems, others stated that such data was elicited from the University's marketing function but two respondents suggested that they had to get this sort of data analysed themselves from various internal and external sources. The variation in approaches to data collection, management and analysis could suggest that strategic decision making is affected by the internal quality and availability of information.

***Marketing orientation*** – the majority of respondents stated that they felt their faculty/school was marketing oriented. Some went on to give examples of new

programmes which had been developed for industrial clients which were innovative in terms of content and delivery.

The majority of respondents from both pre and post 92 institutions stated that they led a team who were adept at developing market opportunities for programmes.

However, some pre 92 respondents explained that they did consider what the post 92 institution competition were developing and successful at delivering when developing their own products/programmes. Indeed, one respondent felt that his institution was very creative in its approach but this was based on the competitions' offerings.

“We are good at ‘me-better’ rather than ‘me-too’ in terms of programme development. We watch to see what the post 92 institutions are doing well and we then develop a similar product but do it better”

### **Leadership Style and Impact on the Centre of the University**

Half of the respondents indicated that they personally had had an influential role on some of the marketing practices within the University as a whole. Four respondents (two from each type of university) explained how their leadership of the positioning of the Business School to varying degrees had been embraced by the VC who had then taken the faculty resulting positioning statement and developed it for the whole institution.

### **Discussion**

These findings indicate a number of interesting areas which help understand the role of Deans in the leadership of positioning a faculty or Business School. The research has identified that there is little difference in the perceptions of leadership between Deans from post and pre 92 institutions.

Deans who have an industrial background seem to be able to draw on this background for their leadership skills strongly, which confirms Spendlove's (2007) study. Most Deans were concerned about their own identity as academics and their research credibility. This was the case for both types of institutions although the pre 92 Deans are more relaxed about this phenomenon as, in the main, they remain on fix term contracts only as Deans and are happy to know that they can return to their research at

some point. With post 92 Deans, there seems to be a personal struggle in trying to maintain their academic credibility and managing or leading their faculty/Business School, with many resorting to working excessive hours at the weekend or during their leave on their personal research.

The leadership competences identified by the respondents concurred with the majority of the literature in the area (Middlehurst, 1993; Stensaker, 1999; Aasen and Stensaker, 2007; Martin and Marion, 2005; Thompson and Harrison, 2000; Osseo-Asare, Longbottom and Murphy, 2005). However, it was interesting to note that Deans from pre 92 institutions saw themselves as spending more time on leading strategy than the Deans from post 92 institutions. This may be related to the level of control and senior management team risk management within such universities.

One of the most interesting findings, which back up marketing academics' views (Argyriou, Leeflang, Saunders and Verhoef, 2008), is that successful organisations are creative and marketing orientated in their approach. Indeed, this study seems to indicate that Deans do have a good understanding and grasp of marketing concepts, notably the approaches to strategic positioning (regardless of their own subject area). Many of the Deans interviewed indicated that they were strongly leading the strategic positioning or repositioning of their faculty/Business School and considered it an important part of their strategic leadership role. This is in spite of the fact that many had not received traditional leadership training in the area. This phenomenon could be seen as a result of the turbulence in the UK economic environment and major competition within HE (including the increase in student fees in the UK) maybe perceived to be more important than it was a few years ago. However, the lack of clear information and data in many universities seems to hinder the Dean in their leadership. Market share did not seem to be viewed as important but the achieving of targets (for student numbers) was more important. This study seems to support Davies' and Thomas' (2009 pg 1401) suggestion that more "future-orientated deans" need to be innovative, explore new trends and exploit new opportunities.

Although this is a relatively small study, the research does seem to identify that the background, education, experience, behaviours of the senior academic leaders does

have an impact on the leadership of strategic marketing for the faculty/Business School, although this is not necessarily reflected in their personal subject area.

### **Implications for Theory, Practice and Future Research**

This research adds to the debate about whether leaders within HE should be developing personal marketing competences or pure leadership skills to be effective leaders for effective development and implementation of marketing strategy. Clearly, it must be remembered that this study was based on a sample of Deans who lead Business Schools and have an understanding of business. This may indicate why they appear to be comfortable with their understanding and leadership of marketing strategy. It would be interesting to test this further with Deans from in other academic disciplines.

One of the most interesting findings related to the analytical skills of Deans and the perceived necessity to be able to hone these skills in the future when Deans may be required to lead a 'down-sizing' strategy in some Business Schools rather than a growth strategy, which most Schools have been enjoying for a number of years in the UK. Given the turbulence of the current economic and political environment, it may be that these are the skills that require greater emphasis and focus for future Deans/PVCs. Indeed, this paper supports David and Thomas' (2009) suggestion that Deans/PVCs will need to be very flexible, entrepreneurial and able to manage a strong brand and thus Business School Deans will need to ensure that they hone such management skills – especially in the current difficult environment within UK Higher Education.

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