REVIEW OF INTERNATIONAL GEOGRAPHICAL EDUCATION

ISSN: 2146-0353 ● © RIGEO ● 11(9), SPRING, 2021

www.rigeo.org

Research Article

Missions of Universities as a Reflection of Their Identities or Missions of Universities as a Reflection of Their Value and Content Identity and the Uniqueness of Their Brands

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Abstract

The article deals with the analysis of a correlation between the stated missions and brands of 100 Russian universities, which according to the RAEX rating agency were considered to be the best Russian universities in 2018. With the help of the content analysis of mission texts and materials on main spheres of activities placed on universities' websites, and based on in-depth interviews with faculty members and students, the research analyzes the role of their missions as stated by universities in reflecting their values and the unique nature of their brands. All Russian best universities state three traditional missions: educational, research and social. However, the relation between the importance of those missions varies depending on the university in question, which results in shaping its value and content identity and is a prerequisite strengthening the uniqueness of its brand. The research helps to identify basic conditions necessary to shape a unique identity of a university: a unique correlation among educational, research and social missions; proved dominant ideas in a general mission statement; substantiation of those dominant ideas in educational, research and socially significant activities of universities.

Keywords

Brand, Identity, Mission, University, Uniqueness, Value.

To cite this article: Osipova, E, A, Bezpalov, V, V, Osipova, A, V, , Kutyrkina , L, V, and Petushkova, E, V. (2021) Missions of Universities as a Reflection of Their Identities or Missions of Universities as a Reflection of Their Value and Content Identity and The Uniqueness of Their Brands. *Review of International Geographical Education (RIGEO), 11*(9), 1789-1799. Doi: 10.48047/rigeo.11.09.153

Submitted: 10-10-2020 ● **Revised:** 15-12-2020 ● **Accepted:** 20-02-2021

Introduction

In one of his interviews Francisco Marmolejo, a World Bank's Lead Education Specialist, called the contemporary university 'a positive public laboratory of changes'. One cannot overestimate the role of universities in the development of nowadays society. It goes without saying that with the constantly growing importance of science, academic research and higher education in all spheres of our life, this role is going to gain even more significance. Modern universities face multiple new opportunities, which, in their turn, are closely connected with new challenges. Involvement of universities into global and international processes are changing the educational, research and social spheres of the globalizing world and universities in it.On the one hand, academic mobility of professors, researchers and students is actively expanding worldwide. Thanks to the digital educational sphere, educational resources created by best professionals are becoming much wider available for faculty members and higher education students from all over the world. Interuniversity and international cooperation in research and educational spheres is developing, with the number of socially important collaborations among universities, commercial companies and public organizations increasing. International accreditation of tertiary education institutions and introduction of international rating for universities let the world expert community work on defining such efficiency indicators which should not only evaluate the results of all the spheres of universities' activities but also encourage their development, stimulate the growth of the number of universities reaching high ratings, to orient universities towards new social and natural challenges.

On the other hand, globalization processes and reduced financing of university education result in acute competition among universities, deepen inequality among universities of different countries and regions, cut opportunities for development for those universities which have not achieved high rating up to now. Among other challenges many universities are facing today is outflow of funds, students and best faculty members to more prestigious universities with stronger brands. Globalization of education, application of common ratings, encouraging Anglo-American model of higher education, expansion of the number of countries and universities introducing education in English, and so on, are widening research and educational horizons of universities taking part in the process on internalization. However, the same processes result in universities losing their unique identities, standardizing them and weakening their brands.

Thus, globalization processes in the development of contemporary universities lead not only to expanding their potential but also to increasing controversies, the most significant of them being the controversy between objective movement towards standardization of universities and the increasing significance of a unique value and content identity of each particular university. It is this unique value and identity of a university that as a rule provides its capacity to compete successfully with other universities for resources, best research and teaching faculty, for most motivated and talented students, etc. Besides, a unique value and content identity of a university impacts not only its compatibility but has also a huge social and cultural significance. Despite the popularization of a market approach to higher education and introduction of market terms in the description of educational processes, universities are still socially and culturally significant institutions influencing the development of the society and the life of each person related to higher education and the development of science using its achievements, which means, basically, all of us. Universities also play an important role in shaping the identity and strengthening the brands of the territories they are located in. It is no wonder that Oxford, Cambridge (UK), Berkley, Princeton, Stanford (USA), Zurich (Switzerland) and other places where the world's most prestigious universities are located have been called university cities. Universities state their value and content identities in their missions. Despite the fact that universities started publishing their official statements on their missions since early 30s of the 20th centuries (the first ones who published their missions in their catalogues were American universities), objectively every university has had its own social vocation throughout the whole development of university education.

With the development of scientific and academic knowledge and ongoing changes in the society, universities' missions have been changing too. In the Middle Ages universities turned into the centers of science, culture and enlightenment, while their missions were related to the transition of cultural heritage. Since the 16th century, along with their educational and research missions, another social function of universities was preparing state officials. In the 17th century, which was a crisis time for education due to outdating curricula, growing incompetence of professors and universities lagging behind new scientific knowledge, the authority of many

universities started declining, while their educational and research missions were losing their significance. But from the 19th century, with emerging national universities and the need for forming national elites and relinquishing Latin as a teaching language, universities' missions started reviving in a new role. Modern universities developing in the global educational, research and social environment are implementing three missions: educational, research and social ones. The Great Chart of European universities signed by rectors from 250 universities in Bologna in 1988 states "universities must give future generations educations and training that will teach them, and through them others, to respect the great harmonies of their natural environment and of life itself". However, the contribution of each university into this equilibrium depends on its capacity to overcome current controversies in the development of university education. To a considerable extent it depends on the capacity of each university to create its own unique educational, research and social mission as reflected in the three parts of its mission. It is the uniqueness of its mission that lets a university to shape that set of values which can turn into the university's key development vectors providing the unique nature of its educational, research and social programs, expansion of those partnership interrelations which help to strengthen the uniqueness of the university brand. The challenge of developing university's mission highlighting its unique brand is not so easy as all universities are involved in educational and research activities and interact with the society. Not all modern universities succeeded in it, which is proven by the results of studies showing that missions of many universities are too similar. Nevertheless, this task is becoming increasingly relevant both for the development of each university in particular and university education per se.

Literature Review

The first fundamental study on the analysis of university's mission was the work of the Spanish philosopher and culturologist Jose Ortega y Gasset published in 1930. In his *Mision de la Universidad* Otega y Gasset emphasizes that culture is a vital system of ideas belonging to any epoch (Ortega y Gasset, 1999), and to go hand in hand with his time an average person needs to perceive main culturally significant disciplines, which should be the main responsibility of university education. And if, as the philosopher argues, the medieval university saw its mission mainly in transferring culture, since the 19th century the university has focused on professional education and research activities, producing 'new barbarians' without a vital system of perceptions about the world and human beings correlating with its epoch (Ortega y Gasset, 1999).According to Jose Ortega y Gasset, new barbarians have wider knowledge than before but at the same time they lag behind their epoch and are not able to perceive and solve the problems of this epoch. Thus, the very first fundamental study of universities missions set the question on its key social and cultural role influencing the ability of the society to cope with the challenges of their epoch. In 1948 an article was published called *The Mission of the Universities*. Its author G.M. Trevelyan, a British historian and academic, talks about the impossibility to distinguish between educational and social missions of the university and interconnection between the process of educating professionals and experts and upbringing of good citizens, "men and women of culture and wide understanding". According to Trevelyan, "it is necessary for the purposes of a high civilization that professional men and specialists should themselves be men of culture and understanding" (Trevelyan, 1948, p. 480).In the early 50s Peter Drucker (1974) raises the issue of the mission's role in the development of any organization, and in 1974 in his book *Management* he studies business missions as "the foundation for priorities, strategies, plans, and work assignments" (p. 57).In 1987 in their article *Corporate Mission Statements: The Bottom Line* John A. Pearce from George Mason University and Fred David from Auburn University substuntiated the relevance of shaping a mission for all the directions of activities of an organization and suggested expressing the following elements in its content: philosophy, self-concept, public image, customer/market, product/service, geographic domain, technology, concern for survival (Pearce & David, 1987).

In the 90s of the 19th century discussions also started on the feasibility of universities stating their missions as a valuable management tool and on the importance of universities reaching out to their staff with their mission's content "to develop a real sense of purpose within the organisation" (Davies & Glaiser, 1996, p. 262). It was then that most European universities published their missions. In 2008 Cochran, David, Gibson and Kendrick (2008) proposed the practical framework for developing an effective mission statement which includes the following four stages: Orientation,

Component Analysis, Communication Analysis, and Applicability Analysis.
According to A.P. Lungu (2015), the missions of commercial and non-for-profit organizations clarify the purpose of an organization, aim to streamline both the internal and external decision-making processes. Agreeing with the idea that missions play a key role and determine the aims of the organization, D. Berlan stresses that it is of vital importance for each organization that its official mission statements comply with a true mission of the organization. The researcher also distinguishes a personal concept of the organization's mission which is predetermined by its individual interpretation and is based on personal values of each member of this organization. In turn, the dominating mission of the organization is related to collective interpretation. It is this interpretation that leads the real activity of the organization (Berlan, 2017).The significance of missions and values of a university and their impact on personal values of its students are proved by the study by J. Webeĸ and J. Warnell, which analyzed the differences between the values of those students who studied in religious and in secular universities. The research showed that the values of students from secular universities are more focused on professional competencies, while in universities with officially stated religious values, personal values of students are more socially and morally oriented (Weber & Warnell, 2018).
Considering that "mission and core values inform strategic communication processes", as generalized in encyclopedic articles (Seeger & Seeger, 2018), many scholars see a certain interconnection and interdependence between the organization's brand and mission, including modern universities, as both a mission and a brand reflect a unique value and content identity of a university. Initially the term 'brand' and the branding process was related to products and services and their application in the sphere of higher education was arguable (Holt, 2002). Considering branding a commercially oriented activity Brooks believes that for universities, even in the conditions of their commercialization, creating strong brands of the world level is turning into a challenge as their main aims have a non-for-profit character (Brookes, 2003). Many researchers mention the difficulty of defining a single comprehensive identity and formulating real defining characteristics of a university as an organization with a complex structure implementing multiple tasks. However, according to Caldwell and Coshall (2002), in the conditions of increasing competition among universities brands have become their strategic asset and a source for competitive advantages. In his research, Bennett talks about not only an opportunity but also an acute need for creating strong brands for higher education institutions. According to the researcher, on the one hand, branding lets each institution in particular to perceive its own identity related to its unique mission, and on the other hand, creating a strong brand helps them to compete successfully with other educational institutions (Bennett, Ali-Choudhury, & Savani, 2008). Blumenthal and Bergstrom (2003) connect universities' branding with their corporate culture and social responsibility as it is these sides of university life that can contribute something unique and significant to each university's brand. It correlates with the third – social – mission of universities. Hatch and Schultz (2003) argue that each university should form its corporate brand based on a strategic vision and unique organizational culture.
E. Osipova (2015), analyzing the branding of organizations in social and cultural spheres, as well as commercial companies, concludes that branding in the sphere of culture and education is connected with revealing a unique value and content identity of each institution or project, while the branding of commercial companies, products and services is based on introducing social and cultural content into the phenomena which don't possess it per se. Therefore, despite the complexity of their branding processes, universities have much wider opportunities predetermined by not artificial but real advantages, by a unique experience of each university. In the article *It's Hard to Differentiate One Higher End Brand From Another* by Nate Dvorak and Brandon Busteed (2015), the experts of global analytics and advice firm Gallup based on the analysis of 50 university missions reveal the main problems with their formulation: missions of various universities look very similar; their missions don't express the uniqueness of each university; the missions don't reflect the results of the university's activities. The experts see a direct interconnection between the university's mission and the strength of its brand, as both should be based on its unique values.
Jennifer Ellis and Paul Miller (2014), having studied the correlation between what modern universities believe in and what they implement in reality, come to the conclusion that "what they believe and do is not always clear"; that's why mission statements of many universities "need to be re-examined, and in some cases simplified, to more closely reflect global (and local) policy goals" (p. 83). A research by Joseph M. Valenzano and Samuel P. Wallace (2014) also proves how important it is for a university branding that all the restructuring and new educational programs should comply with its stated mission.

Studies on value orientation of prospective university students who tend to focus more on surviving in the competitive environment of the nowadays society also provide worrying results for universities' missions and brands and their interconnection. Thus, C. Chapleo who studied approaches to branding at UK universities discovered new links between the demands addressed to a university by its prospective students and its brand. With the growing competition, these links are becoming increasingly pragmatic and students entering universities want to have guaranties, not just promises, of prestigious internships, employment and a career growth before entering the university in question. To build university brands the researcher suggests the ideas of "conceptual framework, the branded experience and experiential branding" (Chapleo, 2015, p. 2).
It should also be noted that studies on universities' missions and branding are mostly carried out autonomously, despite the fact that they consider common identification characteristics of educational institutions, such as identity, uniqueness, values, goals and results.

Materials and Methods

The study of a mission as a reflection of value and content identity of universities and the uniqueness of their brands was based on the materials of 100 Russian universities which, according to the RAEX rating agency data, were considered the best in 2018. The RAEX rating agency has been conducting annual rating of Russian universities since 2012. The high competence of the agency is proved by the fact that its ratings have successfully undergone an international audit by the IREG Observatory. There are 1171 universities registered at present in Russia. The choice of the best universities for the analysis was related to the fact that they serve as models for other Russian educational institutions, have a more successful experience in all spheres of activities, including that one in perceiving the concepts of their development and their mistakes have a more significant impact on the brands of those universities. The main aim of the research is to reveal in the texts of missions, news materials issued by universities and in the statements by their faculty members and students those value and content characteristics which serve as a basis for the unique value and content self-identification of the universities and a foundation for developing their unique brands.To this end, the methods of content analysis, comparative analysis and in-depth interviews were applied. First of all, the research included the content analysis of the materials from official websites of 100 top Russian universities. The study of the websites' materials involved the analysis of the universities' missions as well as the information on their spheres of activities and news feeds to see if they comply with the missions as stated by the universities.
Considering that modern universities implement three missions – educational, research and social ones, revealing dominating ideas of the universities' missions was one of the research tasks. According to RAEX the list of Russia's top 100 universities includes both the oldest ones, founded back in the 18th century – Lomonosov Moscow State University (1775), Saint Petersburg State University (1725) and the universities which started their educational and research activities quite recently – Higher School of Economics (1992). Besides Moscow and Saint Petersburg, Russia's two 'capitals', the geography of Russian best universities includes such cities as Barnaul, Belgorod, Vladivostok, Voronezh, Yekaterinburg, Kazan', Krasnoyarsk, Nizhny Novgorod, Novosibirsk, Perm', Rostov-on-Don, Samara, Tomsk, Tyumen', Ufa, Yakutsk and others. The study of the dominating ideas in the missions of 100 best Russian universities showed that these universities can be roughly divided into 5 clusters:

1. Universities which consider educational, research and social missions as equally important.
2. Universities where the educational mission dominates.
3. Universities where two missions dominate – educational and research ones.
4. Universities where two missions dominate – educational and social ones.
5. Universities where the dominating mission is the research or scientific one.

The following questions were addressed in the process of comparative analysis, while revealing how a university implements each cluster of its mission, and develops its brand:

- What is the university's focus of attention?
- How universities define their identity?
- Which values are considered as the key ones by the university?
- How missions and values of universities are revealed in their practical activities?

- What are the specific characteristics of this cluster of universities?
- Which prospects are created by these characteristics for universities' branding?

In addition to that, in-depth interviews were held with faculty members, bachelor, master and post graduate students of universities from different parts of Russia. Such interviews at remote universities became possible thanks to expert field trips to those universities taken by one of the authors of the research. The interviewing involved 42 respondents from 7 universities. The respondents were asked the following questions:

- Do you know the mission of your university? If yes, what is the source of information on the mission? If no, which would be the mission of your university, in your opinion?
- Is the stated mission of the university implemented in its educational, research and social activities? Does the university's mission correlate with the main characteristics of its brand?
- Are you personally involved in the process of implementing the university's mission and strengthening its brand? If not, then why? If yes, then by whose initiative?
- Do you believe that the mission of your university needs adjustment?
- Do you believe that the university should work more on strengthening its brand?

The respondents' answers during the interviews helped to correlate the official statements of the universities on their missions with how faculty members and students perceive the universities' identities and the key characteristics of their brands.

Results and Discussion

The study of the dominating ideas in the missions of Russia's top 100 universities revealed that the following 59 universities equal the roles of educational, research and social missions: Lomonosov Moscow State University, Saint Petersburg State University; Tomsk State University; St. Petersburg Research University of IT, Mechanics and Optics; Plekhanov Russian University of Economic and others. First of all, the research showed that the missions of best Russian universities are focused on *simultaneous and complex development of education, science and society*. And the content analysis of the missions' texts showed that even at those universities which have equal educational, research and social components, education and science serve as prerequisites and incentives for the society development. According to the missions of those universities, the development of the society is the main reason these universities should carry out their educational and research activities for. It should be noted that this position is in many ways stipulated by the historical traditions of Russian higher education.

Thus, the mission of the first Russian classical university - Lomonosov Moscow State University - was defined as early as in the middle 18th century by the Empress Elizabeth I in her Order on the establishment of Moscow State University from January 23 (12) 1755. In this mission, the "enlightenment of people" was mentioned as the main purpose of the university, which was to be fulfilled for the "benefit of the human society's life" and "prosperity of the whole homeland".

In nowadays interpretation, the true nature of this university's mission is proven in the historical context of the 21 century. The mission mentions a fundamental role of national educational identity, university traditions and a need to harmonize 'the national' with global educational trends, while Lomonosov Moscow State University poses itself as an integrator of scientific, educational, economic and social processes and as a model of cultural environment for the Russian society. The universities seeing their missions in a complex development of education, science and society claim different scopes of its implementation, depending on the size of the university in question, scale of its research activities, and the territory recognizing the authority and the status of this university, as well as on the strength of its brand. Considering the large territory of the Russian Federation, such factor as the number of universities located in the region plays an important role in how the university defines the scale of the implementation of their educational, research and social missions.

Based on that fact, 28 universities see their mission in encouraging social, economic and spiritual development of their region or their specific industry branch. 19 universities out of the 100 studied mention the well-being of Russia and its citizens; 12 major universities focus on the implementation of their educational, research and social missions aiming to preserve and encourage spiritual values of all humankind, to change the world for the better, etc. Their main tasks are building an environment (creative, constructive, international) and developing an infrastructure (educational, research and scientific, innovative).The research proved that the universities regarding their educational, research and social missions as a whole, place a human personality

in the focus of their attention while seeing the university itself as an environment for a Human Being's self-determination in life as a unique personality. Therefore, the main value for them is a Human Being. The key words for them are democracy of relations, cultivation of humanistic values, establishment of formative traditions, development of understanding and cooperation. It should be also noted that in the missions of those Russian universities where education, science and society are regarded as equal, preserving and encouraging cultural traditions and spiritual values, mutual understanding and cooperation are given more value than compatibility.

An important specific feature of these universities is also the implementation of their cultural and educational mission. It is reflected both in their programs of university development and in their news materials and reporting documents, while those cultural and educational programs target various public groups.

Thus, Lomonosov Moscow State University carries out educational programs for school teachers, Russian school students and foreign graduate students. Among the examples are online festival of friendship *Folklore as a People's Confessions*; TV bridges between the students of Lomonosov Moscow State University and students from other friendly universities where students get to know traditions of other countries; all Russian competition of kids' letters *Best Lesson* organized in partnership with the Post of Russia, The Russian Writers Union, Labour Union of Communication Workers and the Teacher's Newspaper along with Lomonosov Moscow State University; Geographical Spelling Test for everyone; national evenings, such as *Russian Tea* and others. Saint Petersburg State University carries out a global research and educational project called *From* Students of St. Petersburg State University to School.

Tomsk State University founded a special Center for the evaluation of enriching programs and popularization of knowledge on child development, which in addition to education programs for adults organizes festivals of creative projects for primary school kids called *Sunny City*. St. Petersburg University for Information Technologies, Mechanics and Optics is developing a techno park for children aged 8-14, hosts a number of educational programs for schoolkids on robotechnics, future IT; and the famous Museum of Optics under the university conducts a wide educational program. Plekhanov Russian University of Economics organizes educational University Saturdays, Christmas Readings and economic interactive programs for school children. The unique nature of those educational programs held by those universities is connected with their profile, historical traditions and understanding of their mission at the crossroads of education, science and social benefit.

The prospects for strengthening the brands of universities with equal educational, research and social missions are related, first of all, to a wider and more active dissemination in the media of information on unique programs and projects held by the universities where they implement all three missions; specifically, on such programs and projects which have both educational and scientific value and have a positive impact on social development. As a rule, these are large scale annual project brands which can involve more participants and provide news opportunities for the media.

Educational mission is a dominating idea for 17 best Russian universities: Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation; Lobachevsky State University of Nizhni Novgorod; Russian Foreign Trade Academy of the Ministry for the Economic Development of the Russian Federation; Novosibirsk State Technical University; Moscow State Linguistic University; Kazan' Tupolev National Science and Technology University and others.The universities claiming *educational mission* as a priority consider education as a multilevel system providing the continuity of educational process. The main characteristics for experts trained at these universities are believed to be interdisciplinary competences, compatibility, high adaptability, ability to act in the conditions of the fast changing world. An important identification characteristic of universities with the dominating educational mission is the focus on active introduction of innovations into the educational process, development of school Olympiads trend, carrying out unique programs for post university education. Thus, the news feed and the sections on its activities of Lobachevsky State University of Nizhni Novgorod on its official website show that the university in its activities is focused mainly on developing pilot projects, international academic mobility of students and faculty, hiring best faculty members. It is no coincidence that Lobachevsky State University is the winner in all major competition programs aimed to develop education and innovations in Russia. Novosibirsk State Technical University implements the following educational projects at the federal level: "Developing the innovative infrastructure objects and training personnel in the sphere of innovation entrepreneurship"; project on developing a program of advanced training and educational and methodological complex in the sphere of nanostructures ceramics production

within the framework of the competition held by the Infrastructure and Education Programs Fund of ROSNANO. Novosibirsk State Technical University is one of the winners of the Russian competition of university innovative educational projects.

Moscow State Linguistic University identifies itself as a basic organization on languages and cultures of the CIS states and is a major methodological center on foreign languages education in Russia. It takes part in international educational programs held by the UNESCO, the Council of Europe, the European Commission, the European Center for Modern Languages, SCO University and others. Brands of the universities with dominating educational mission, as a rule, strengthen unique innovative educational projects. The scale of these universities' branding depends on the appeal and the scope of the implementation of those projects.

15 universities out of the studied 100 regard their ***educational and research missions*** as their priorities. Among them are MGIMO University under the Foreign Affairs Ministry; Novosibirsk State University; Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University; Ural Federal University; Gubkin Russian State University of Oil and Gas; National Research University "Moscow Power Engineering Institute"; Moscow Aviation Institute and others. The domination of educational and research missions makes the universities focus on developing strategies of rapid development in education, science and corporate management, generation of new knowledge and innovative ideas, creation of resource effective and high-end technologies, integration of science, education and production.

Thus, the motto of Novosibirsk State Technical University is "True Science". The University has 7 scientific educational consortiums, their strategic partners being leading teams from the institutes of the Novosibirsk science campus, innovative companies and residents of techno parks. The University is renowned for its science tournaments and lecture centers where scientists tell students and professors about their discoveries. Connecting education and science, the University organizes Olympiads for school children on IT, chemistry, physics, mathematics, astronomy. The winners of these Olympiads get an opportunity to study at the famous University Summer School where young faculty members and famous scientists give classes. The unique nature of Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University is explained by the fact that along with carrying out a wide range of multidisciplinary research, developing techno parks, laboratories, scientific schools, pan-industry studies and holding a number of scientific events, the University trains researchers with a high level of culture organizing for its students creative, musical, literary, historical and philosophical workshops.

Moscow Aviation Institute hosts Russian and international forums in the sphere of aerospace education and science, international conferences on Aerospace System Science and Engineering, Aerospace Science weeks. All students of Moscow Aviation Institute have their internships in field-oriented aerospace companies, doing their industry-oriented course papers and degree theses under the joint supervision of industry scientists and experts. The University carries out various educational and scientific projects for school children in the techno park for kids called "Take off Trajectory", at the physics and mathematics school, model aircraft centers, engineering classes at regular schools, at scientific festivals for children.

All universities with dominating educational and research missions regards scientific knowledge and internationalization of science and education as main values. They focus on founding unique scientific schools, on international cooperation in educational and research projects and see the role of universities as centers for education and science, which, in its turn, opens additional prospects for strengthening the unique elements of these universities' brands.

5 universities have **educational and social missions** as dominating ones: RUDN University; Moscow Pedagogical State University; Samara State Technical University; Ufa State Oil Technical University; Ural State Medical University. RUDN University as the most international university teaching students from 70 countries of the world, states its commitment to studies, research and public activity. The mission of the University is "Uniting people from different cultures by knowledge RUDN brings up leaders who are making the world better". With its social and educational dominating ideas, RUDN also actively carries out its research activities. However, the University's self-identification is, above all, relates to various events, festivals, weeks of culture of different peoples, etc.

The analysis of news feeds, reports and spheres of activities of other universities stating educational and social missions as the dominating ones did not prove that statement. So the missions of those universities did not prove to really comply with the materials covering their activities. Nevertheless, the potential for strengthening unique characteristics of brands at the universities with those dominating ideas is mostly connected with the dissemination of information on the implementation of the chosen dominant ideas.

Research mission is announced as a priority by 4 universities: Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology (state university); National Research Nuclear University (MEPhI); National Research University Higher School of Economics; Bauman Moscow State Technical University.

All the universities claiming *research mission* as a priority focus on training outstanding scientists and scholars, leaders in sciences and technologies with the worldview and methodological culture, on discovering new research directions and building distinguished expert communities. They pay special attention to creating unique systems of students' selection and their involvement into real research and scientific practice, on establishing centers for fundamental and applied research able to forecast world trends in sciences, technics and technology. Each of these universities have been building for dozens of years their unique systems for the selection and training of students for the world level competitions, for participation in cutting-edge research projects. Thus, the legendary "PhysTech System" makes it possible for its graduates to lead in many directions of modern physics' development at the world level.

News feeds and reports of MEPhI and Bauman University often have mentions of scientific discoveries, new intellectual materials, development of program complexes, innovative technologies, victories of young scientists, etc. As such information provides newsbreaks for the media, these universities are often covered by the Russian media and the potential of their branding is connected with a wider world media coverage. Thus, the study showed that all best Russian universities have dominating ideas in they officially stated missions, besides, most universities implement those dominant ideas in their educational, research and social activities and have a potential for strengthening their unique value and content identity and brands.

Interviews with faculty members (19 professors), graduate students (53 respondents) and postgraduate students (28 respondents) from 7 universities showed that they all provide positive feedback about their universities, consider all their activities as relevant and see their active development. Answering the question "Do you know the mission of your university?" neither of the respondents was able to demonstrate the knowledge of the precise text of the mission, which proves the fact that the universities didn't carry our any special activity on studying the mission text either with the faculty or with graduate and post graduate students studying at those universities.

As a potential source of information on the mission, all respondents (100 %) named the university's official website (respondents – students and faculty), faculty respondents also mentioned among the documents where missions, in their opinion, should be placed, the regulations and the strategic development programs of these universities. Despite the fact that either faculty members or students did not study intentionally the missions of their universities, most faculty members and students (87%) were able to quite precisely reproduce the main idea of the universities' missions, which proves that these missions reflect the true value and content identity of these universities.

Having studied the official wording of the mission, 66% of the respondents answered that the stated mission completely complies with the directions and content of the university's activities and influences the formation of the brand. 27% answered that the missions considerably reflect the directions and content of the university's activities and significantly influence the formation of the brand, and only 7 respondents (7%) couldn't say anything definitive on the reflection of the directions and the content of the university's activities in its mission.

When asked the question on their personal involvement in the process of the implementation of the university's mission and strengthening its brand, most respondents answered positively explaining it by the fact that they are actively taking part in the educational and research activities, when possible taking part in socially important events and programs of the universities and telling about most interesting events and achievements to their family and friends, and sharing the information in social networks. Most respondents named the university (its head, heads of departments, the student committee) as the initiator of their involvement into the implementation of the university's mission and strengthening its brand (66% of the respondents).

In-depth interviews showed that only 14% respondents believe that the mission of their university needs a serious improvement. However, 91% respondents mentioned that their universities need to increase the efficiency of their brand communication. According to the respondents, it is the visual elements of brand communication that need increasing the appeal.

Conclusions

The conducted study showed a significant influence of Russia's top universities' missions on

shaping their value and content identity and strengthening a unique nature of their brands. The study proved that, unlike commercial companies and products whose brands are created by artificial addition of value and content meaning, universities' brands are immanently characterized by a unique value and content identity. The research also showed that the basic conditions for shaping a unique value and content identity of universities are a unique correlation of educational, research and social missions, substantiated dominating ideas in the general mission statement and the support of these dominating ideas by unique projects in educational, research and socially significant activities of universities. In their turn, communications aimed at disseminating information on the unique value and content identity of the university among the focus audience and the wide public become one of the most important conditions for strengthening the uniqueness of the brand of each university.

During the research it became obvious that in the complex process of the implementation of dominating missions and strengthening the uniqueness of the brand rather than studying the missions' texts it's much more important to involve faculty, students and representatives of outside target groups into the activity on the implementation of missions. This, on the one hand, allows you to perceive its content intuitively and, on the other hand, expands the circle of active proponents of the university brand and its values and content.

The research also made it possible to see that the most vulnerable spot in the branding of best Russian universities is the implementation of brand communication which is paid much less attention than the practical implementation of dominating missions. Another sphere which needs a serious improvement is visual elements of brand communications, having a great potential for improving the perception of the uniqueness of universities' brand. Obviously, the research on best Russian universities, which have already gained high expert and public assessment, was to have mostly positive results, which could be used by universities as practical recommendations helping to shape missions and organize brand communications. Besides, the research helped to test the system of methods for studying the correlation between educational, research and social missions of universities and the role of this correlation in the reflection of their value and content identity, as well as the uniqueness of brands. However, to be able to grasp the reality in a dynamically developing environment of higher education one needs to further study this issue based on a wider material. A promising direction in this area could be a comparative analysis of how three missions are presented and implemented and how they influence the strengthening of the uniqueness of brands of universities from different regions of Russia considering her large border territories, her multinationalism and her multiconnection nature.

Even more significant for achieving scientific progress and developing practical recommendations would be to study not only the best universities from different parts of the world but also those ones which do not make it into prestigious ratings. According to the authors of the article, it is really important in such research to study the real positive experience of the universities successfully implementing their missions which reflect their value and content identity and strengthen their brands, and to reveal conditions and work out models helping to make this activity more efficient.

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