

Academic sport management programmes as brands?!

An empirical analysis of the "sport, business & law" programme at the University of Bayreuth

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Aim

Since the beginning of the 21st century the European market for higher education has changed dramatically. Especially in Germany, the Bologna declaration of 1999 had a huge impact on the national academic programmes. In this context, the majority of the German institutions of higher education adapted their academic programmes to the bachelor and master system. In total, Germany disposes of 415 institutions of higher education offering programmes for almost 2.4 million students (Federal Statistical Office, 2011). Along with this development all German institutions of higher education have to face an increasing competition for financial support and new students, too (Greven, 2011). Therefore, the marketing of those institutions and its academic programmes becomes more and more important and will be one of the key success factors for the future (Moore, 2004). Based on those circumstances we raise the questions how academic sport management programmes can be successfully managed as brands, and how those academic brands are perceived by its stakeholders, in our case students. In this regard the first ever established sport management programme in Germany "Sport, Business & Law" at the University of Bayreuth serves as a benchmark for successful marketing. Besides other issues, like public relations, alumni management and business-oriented curricula this sport management programme is registered in the German Patent and Trademark Office since 2000 with the trademark "Spöko" (short for the German designation of the study programme: "Sportökonomie").

Therefore, our empirical analysis is guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the brand perception of the academic sport management programme "Sport, Business & Law"?
2. Which indicators are relevant for the brand image of the academic brand "Spöko"?
3. What is the relation between this academic brand and the University of Bayreuth?

Theoretical background

In the first step, we conducted a literature review in order to establish a common understanding of academic sport management programmes as brands and their roles in the brand architectures of institutions of higher education (Keller, 1993; Aaker/Joachimsthaler, 2000; Moore, 2004). This step is very important, because the management of

academic brands is still in the early stages of its development. Furthermore, we collected comprehensive information about the history and tradition of the "Sport, Business & Law" programme and the role of the University of Bayreuth in the brand architecture of the programme. In summary, our theoretical analysis shows that it is imperative for institutions of higher education to cope with the challenges of a successful brand management.

Methodology

To get more insights about the brand perception and the brand image of the "Sport, Business & Law" programme, we conducted two studies, a qualitative pre-study and a quantitative main study during winter semester 2011/12. At this stage, the analysis is focused on students of the University of Bayreuth. Future research should focus on further stakeholders, like prospective students, scientists, and potential employers. In the pre-study we collected 15 guided interviews with students from different study programmes. The guideline was based on the brand management literature as well as on our theoretical analysis. The main goal of this pre-study was to derive suitable items for the quantitative analysis. Altogether, we could identify specific items with regard to the core values of the sport management programme, several brand related dimensions of the academic brand "Spöko", and the relation between the brands of the university and the study programme. Based on these results we collected data in a quantitative survey with a data set of $n = 447$ students. The items were measured on a 7-point-Likert scale from "1 = totally agree" until "7 = totally disagree". For the data analysis we applied descriptive statistics and exploratory factor analysis.

Results

The results of the data analysis offer an interesting overview of the brand perception of the academic sport management programme "Sport, Business & Law" from the perspective of local university students. Furthermore, the comparative analysis of sport management students versus students of other programmes allows us to identify gaps in the evaluation of the brand perception of the sport management programme between those two groups. This analysis can serve as a starting point for the future marketing of the study programme. Besides that, our findings indicate that the university and the study programme are perceived in terms of an umbrella brand and its affiliated brand. Basically, our results demonstrate that the implementation of a strategic brand management would be a major support for academic sport management programmes to better survive in competition.

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