

COBRANDING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN INVESTIGATION OF STUDENT ATTITUDES

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ABSTRACT

This study examines student attitudes towards brand alliances (in the form of joint degrees) between UK-based higher education institutions. An abridged version of the extensively substantiated model proposed by Simonin and Ruth (1998) provides the theoretical underpinnings of this study. We test the impact of pre-alliance attitudes towards and perceived fit (skill and resources) between collaborating institutions on attitudes for a joint degree offered through an alliance of the two institutions. In addition, we examine spillover effects between pre-and-post alliance attitudes of individual institutions. Using the 2010 ranking list published by the Guardian newspaper, sector experts classified the listed UK business schools into four mutually exclusive tiers (A, B, C, D) with tier A comprising the top and D the lowest ranked schools. Data were collected from 158 recently enrolled business students at a UK institution. Our results indicate significant impact of perceptions of institutional fit on attitudes toward brand alliance between all four tier institutions and confirm the existence of significant spill over effects across all collaborations. On the other hand we report considerable differentiation, depending on rank position or tier of the collaborating institutions, for pre-alliance attitudes on corresponding attitudes towards the alliance (i.e., joint degree) and attitudes of the alliance on post-attitudes of the collaborating institutions. Our findings have implications for decision making while forming alliances in the higher education sector.

INTRODUCTION

Given the highly competitive nature of the higher education sector, institutions are becoming more brand-oriented and spend more resources on branding activities. Recent literature on higher education marketing illustrates this fact (e.g. Maringe and Foskett, 2002;

Maringe, 2006; Bunzel, 2007; Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana, 2007; Lowrie 2007; Chapleo 2011). In addition, increasingly students see the Universities as providers of services in return for their money and consequently exercise great prudence when faced with selecting degrees and the Universities. Universities have responded by formulating new strategies and often forging alliances to leverage from each other's core strengths. A recent trend is where two institutions offer joint degrees or in some cases even operating as partner brands or *cobrands*.

The rise in joint degrees offered by EU educational institutions was reported in the Times Higher Education issue of October 9 2008¹. Universities across Europe, US the UK are increasingly forming alliances and partnerships with foreign institutions as part of their drive for internationalisation² (e.g., the dual masters awards by Newcastle and Groningen Universities; the partnership between City University London, St Petersburg State Polytechnical University and Penza State University; dual MBA by the Swiss School of Management and the European University of Rome). The experience gained by the Universities in the international arena has the potential to be leveraged in the domestic sector, by way of launching joint degrees by UK-based institutions. The viability of such collaborations seems obvious, given the impending changes in funding and structure of UK higher education. However, higher education brand alliances are reported to be facing challenges in managing perceptions towards the joint effort as well as towards each partner, effective management, and marketing of the cobranded product (e.g. Gray, Fam and Llane, 2003; Vidaver-Cohen, 2007; Chapleo, 2010). This calls for investigation of students' attitudes towards the 'right' partnerships along with the effects it would have on the attitudes towards the partners. Knowledge on this issue could provide parameters for forming feasible partnerships that would ultimately benefit both partners.

The above discussion raises the question as to whether joint degrees have an impact on the attitudes of the consumers, i.e. the students because of the respective rankings of the collaborating institutions. Given the prevalent use of ranking tables (e.g. The Guardian's, containing rankings of about 125 UK institutions; also see HEFCE 2008) by the students, it is likely that the differential rankings impact students' attitudes towards the institutions.

The preceding debate leads to the following questions that represent the main objectives of this study:

- (a) The departure point is whether attitudes held for each of the collaborating institutions affect attitudes towards a joint degree that bears the names of both institutions (i.e., cobranded).
- (b) Related to the above, we examine whether the relative ranking of the collaborating institutions impacts on attitudes towards a joint degree. For example, we test the expectation that a joint degree offered by a partnership between an elite and a bottom-ranked institution will be associated with weaker attitudes compared to the same joint degree offered by a partnership between two elite institutions.
- (c) If the above holds, we attempt to identify points of inflection. Specifically, we examine whether there is a critical point, in terms of differences in the relative rankings of the collaborating institutions, at which changes to attitudes towards a cobranded degree take place.
- (d) Finally, we examine whether pre-alliance attitudes towards an institution and attitudes towards the joint degree are related to post-alliance attitudes for the same

¹ Times Higher Education, Oct 9, 2008, available on:
<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=403854>

² See also <http://www.jointdegree.eu>

institution (spill over effects) and whether the pattern of such relationships differs depending on the relative rankings of the collaborating institutions.

Our study investigates the abovementioned objectives by employing an experimental design based on the Simonin and Ruth (1998) model (discussed below). Along with investigating the attitudes for probable cobranded institutions in the higher education sector, the study also aims to contribute to the expanding body of research on cobranding by investigating the consumer attitudes to cobrands in the hitherto unexplored area of higher education.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE

The use of co-branded products as a form of brand management has gained attention from managers and researchers, as evidenced by the practitioner-oriented articles and empirical studies published since the mid-1990s (e.g., Rao and Ruekert, 1994; Park, Jun and Shocker, 1996; Simonin and Ruth, 1998; Desai and Keller, 2002; Washburn, Till and Priluck, 2004; Helmig, Huber and Leeflang, 2008, Lafferty, 2009). In cobranding two, or more, brands endorse each other, or create a new brand (the co-brand) with common features, often creating brand synergies. The partnership also aids the brand owners in developing the cobrands more successfully as compared to what each of the partner brand could do on their own. Although the majority of research in brand alliances or cobranding is located in consumer markets (especially in food related products) there is clear evidence of subject interest in the business to business domain (e.g. Dalhstrom and Dato-on, 2004; Bengtsson and Servais, 2005; Erevelles, Stevenson, Srinivasan and Fukawa, 2008).

Focusing on the consumer-based brand alliance related literature Park *et al.* (1996), for example, argue that the philosophy behind co-branding stems from marketers' expectation that a positive perceived attribute of one of the constituent brands will transfer to the co-branded product, such that the second product will be perceived to perform well on that attribute too. The authors also demonstrate that a co-branded product that consists of two complementary brands has a better attribute profile in consumers' minds than does a direct brand extension of the dominant brand or a co-branded product that consists of two highly favourable but not complementary brands. This was further elaborated by Simonin and Ruth (1998) who suggest that brand alliances have the potential to modify subsequent attitudes (positively or negatively) towards the parent brands. The value and associations consumers derive from the cooperation between the brands has been explored, with studies repeatedly indicating product fit and brand fit to be important drivers of success (e.g. Park *et al.*, 1996; Simonin and Ruth 1998; Baumgarth, 2003; James, 2005). A good fit is one in which two brands are highly complementary in terms of attribute salience and performance levels. Studies show that high complementarity can increase brand salience (Samu, Krishnan and Smith, 1999), improve perceived product performance (Washburn *et al.*, 2004), and expand brand extension scope (Desai and Keller, 2002). Studies have identified characteristics of successful co-brands, reporting the constituent brands' awareness, quality and brand equity to be important factors (Levin, Davis and Levin, 1996; McCarthy and Norris, 1999; Rao, Qu and Ruekert, 1999; Washburn *et al.*, 2000; 2004).

It is well established that successful cobranding could enhance the attitudes towards the partner brands (Simonin and Ruth, 1998; Lafferty, Goldsmith and Hult, 2004). However the extant studies do not go beyond capturing the attitudes towards only one specific cobrand in a product category. None have attempted to investigate the question as to what would be the

impact on consumer attitudes when there are various combinations of brands, such as, a cobrand with both very well known brands, or a cobrand with one very well known and lesser known brand, or one very well known and an even lesser known, and so on. This is linked to the vital question of whether there are critical points in different combinations of alliances where attitudes towards the potential cobrands start diminishing, i.e. points at which the consumers' attitudes show a marked weakening. This gap in knowledge is coupled with a lack of research on cobranding in services, especially in the social sector. For instance, none of the studies investigate the impact on attitudes towards potential cobrands in the higher education sector. Despite the increasing cobranding activities in the higher education sector, as reported earlier, there is a lack of understanding on students' perceptions of the partnerships.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK AND DESIGN

Given its wide acceptance and supporting evidence for its stability across difference sectors (e.g. Baumgarth, 2004; Lafferty *et al.*, 2004; Bleumelhuber, Carter and Lambe, 2007; Helmig, Huber and Leeflang, 2007) a modified version of the model proposed by Simonin and Ruth (1998) represents the conceptual framework of this study. As illustrated in Figure 1, it is hypothesised that pre alliance attitudes towards and institutional (termed as brand in the original paper) fit determine attitudes toward an alliance. In addition, pre alliance attitudes and those towards the alliance impact on post alliance attitudes. The pathways linking pre and post alliance attitudes for the same institution are referred to as spill-over effects.

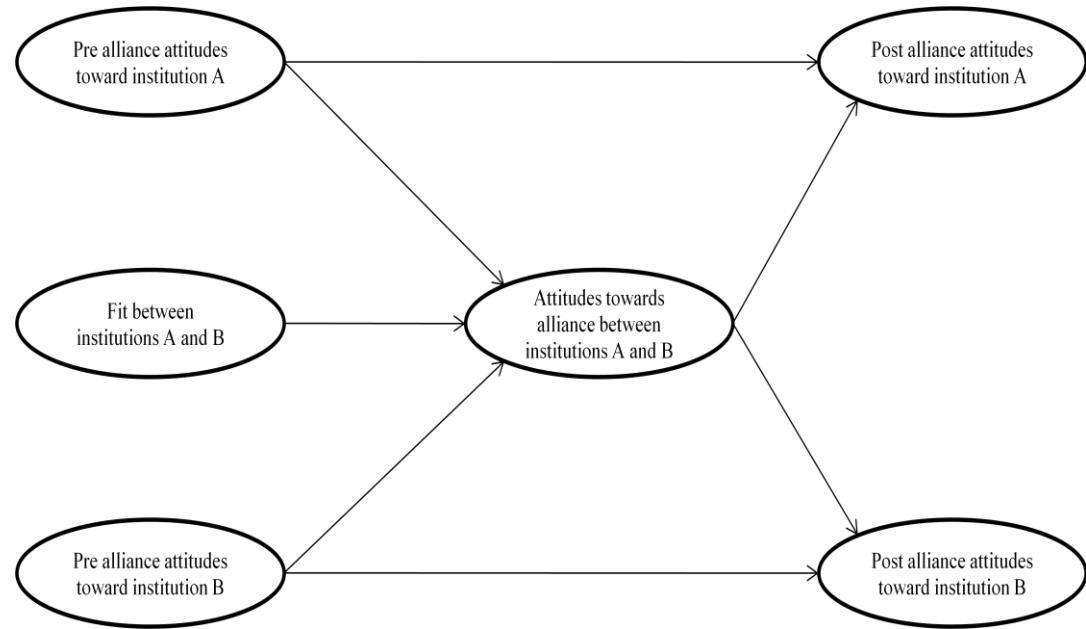


Figure 1: The research framework

Source: Simonin, B. L. and Ruth, J. A. (1998), "Is a Company Known by the Company It Keeps? Assessing the Spillover Effects of Brand Alliances on Consumer Brand Attitudes", *Journal of Marketing Research*, 35(February):30-42

From the original model, on methodological grounds, we omit two variables, product fit (modelled as determinant of attitude towards the alliance) and familiarity (treated as moderator of the hypothesised relationships). As will become apparent in the subsequent section, we test alliances between institutions offering similar programmes (business studies, thus rendering product fit extraneous) and carry out research amongst freshers (expect uniform high degree of familiarity with the institutions).

In order to address the objectives of this study an experimental design was devised. Using the 2010 ranking list published by the Guardian newspaper, sector experts classified the listed UK business schools into four mutually exclusive tiers (A, B, C, D) with tier A comprising the top and D the lowest ranked schools. Scenarios were constructed describing collaborative activities designed to offer a joint business studies degree (i.e., alliance) of the following pairs of institutions – A with A, A with B, A with C and A with D. Anchoring all alliances on an A tier institution allows us to examine changes to attitudes towards the alliance depending on relative standing.

Data were collected, using a web based survey, from 158 freshers enrolled in a business studies degree at a UK institution. The decision to use freshers was based on the expectation that, given that such individuals had recently engaged into their selection process, the issues under consideration had relevance and they were familiar with the various UK institutions that offered courses similar to that in the scenarios. All participants were requested to provide answers to a joint degree by two A tier institutions and to a randomly assigned combination between an A and a lower tier institution. This was achieved by identifying the tier A institution they were most familiar with (denoted as A_1), the second most familiar with (A_2) and the most familiar institution from the randomly assigned tier. The following usage replies were obtained once incomplete replies were eliminated: A_1 with A_2 = 96, A_1 with B = 42, A_1 with C = 56, and A_1 with D = 47.

The research constructs were operationalised using contextualised scales employed by the authors of the adopted conceptual framework (see Appendix for a list). For pre and post alliance we employed three seven point semantic differential items. Institutional fit was measured using two items and for attitudes towards the alliance (joint degree) we used four items; both anchored on a seven point Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree scale.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The small number of replies led to the adoption of Partial Least Squares (PLS) using PLSGRAPH developed by Chin (2003). For a detailed explanation of PLS and comparisons against covariance based SEM the interested reader is referred to, amongst others, Chin (1998), Haenlein and Kaplan (2004) and Tanenhaus (2005). When employing PLS the measurement and structural parameters are estimated together, while examination takes the form of a two stage approach with assessment of the reliability and validity (for RLVs) followed by assessment of the structural model (see Barclay, Higgins and Thompson, 1995).

Reliability of the RLVs was confirmed by retaining scale items/indicators that (a) exhibited loadings with the intended construct of 0.70 or more, and (b) were statistically significant following bootstrapping analysis (500 subsamples; Mathieson, Peacock and Chin, 2001). For overall scale reliability (composite reliability) the measure developed by Fornell and Larcker (1981) was employed with a benchmark of 0.70. Convergent validity was tested by examining the average variance extracted (AVE) proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981) with values greater than 0.50 indicating acceptable convergent validity. Examination of the

information presented in the Appendix indicates that the adopted scales met the above criteria. In addition, discriminant validity was confirmed through comparisons between the square root of a construct's AVE with its bivariate correlations with the remaining constructs (for brevity reasons this information is not included).

In terms of the structural model, PLS makes no assumptions about the distribution of the variables and consequently traditional parametric-based approaches cannot be employed. Instead we refer to R^2 values of the dependent variables and the significance of the pathways (using bootstrapping; Barclay *et al.* 1995; Chin 1998). Examination of the information presented in Table 1 indicates that the model possesses considerable explanatory powers for all alliances (i.e., all R^2 values are greater than 0.45). In terms of the hypothesised relationships, we observe that the pre attitudes₁ → attitudes towards the alliance pathway is significant and negative for collaborations only between A₁ and C or D tier institutions. Only in collaborations between A and B tier institutions is the pre attitudes₂ → attitude toward the alliance pathway significant while the institutional fit → attitudes towards the alliance pathway is confirmed across all alliances. The impact of attitudes toward alliance on post attitudes of A₁ tier institutions is confirmed only for alliances between either two A or an A and a B tier institution. On the other hand the corresponding pathway with either A₂ or lower order institutions exhibits a U pattern, i.e. it is significant for A with A or B but not for C and becomes significant again for A and D tier institutions. Finally, the evidence presented confirms the existence of significant spill over effects (i.e., pathway linking pre and post alliance attitudes for the same institution) for all alliances.

Table 1: Regression coefficients and goodness of fit

Pathways	Standardised coefficients (t-values)			
	A ₁ with A ₂	A ₁ with B ₂	A ₁ with C ₂	A ₁ with D ₂
Pre attitudes ₁ → Attitudes towards alliance	.146 (1.29)	.117 (1.03)	-.137 (2.11*)	-.116 (1.72*)
Pre attitudes ₂ → Attitudes towards alliance	.044 (0.41)	.289 (2.23*)	-.041 (0.26)	.049 (0.534)
Institutional fit _{1 & 2} → Attitudes towards alliance	.609 (5.40***)	.553(5.37***)	.801 (7.08***)	.800 (10.38***)
Attitudes towards alliance → Post attitudes ₁	.184 (2.40**)	.281 (2.89**)	.043 (0.49)	.083 (0.951)
Attitudes towards alliance → Post attitudes ₂	.191 (2.85**)	.146 (2.00*)	.041 (0.93)	.220 (3.93***)
Pre attitudes ₁ → Post attitudes ₁	.689 (8.99***)	.647 (5.27***)	.816 (14.47***)	.716 (6.58***)
Pre attitudes ₂ → Post attitudes ₂	.690 (8.39***)	.866 (14.38***)	.934 (26.94***)	.816 (15.38***)
	R ²	R ²	R ²	R ²
Attitudes toward alliance	.477	.470	.599	.759
Post attitude ₁	.604	.519	.663	.681
Post attitudes ₂	.597	.878	.910	.944

Notes: A, B, C and D denote institutional tiers while subscripts indicate the specific pathway or relationship; for example Pre attitudes₂ → Attitudes towards alliance in the second column refer to the relationship between institution A₂ with alliance while for column three denotes the functional relationship between the institution in tier B with the alliance etc.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Our study investigates attitudes towards joint degrees that contain brand names of the two collaborating institutions. The impact of differential rankings between the collaborating institutions is a key element of this research. The following conclusions and discussion are derived from the application of the well-established Simonin and Ruth (1998) conceptual model, based on an experimental design. Before we deal with the specific objectives of the study, we conclude that the adopted conceptual model exhibited satisfactory explanatory powers throughout, therefore offers confidence regarding the stability of the results.

Irrespective of their relative ranks the institutional fit between the collaborating institutions was found to be a significant determinant of the attitudes towards a co-branded degree. These findings are in line with those supported in previous applications of the Simonin and Ruth model (e.g., Baumgarth, 2004; Lafferty *et al.*, 2004; Bluemelhuber *et al.*, 2007; Helmig *et al.*, 2007). Consequently our study offers support for the generalisability of the relationship between brand fit and attitude towards the brand alliance, in the domain of higher education. Furthermore, we confirm that the need for institutional fit applies irrespective of the relative rank of the collaborating institutions. An examination of the size of the coefficients leads us to conclude that this is especially important when there is high differentiation between collaborating institutions. In addition to the above, we confirm the generalisability of the significant link between pre and post alliance attitudes (e.g., Baumgarth, 2004; Lafferty *et al.*, 2004) in the higher education domain. We further report that the strength of this relationship is broadly consistent irrespective of the rank order of the collaborating institutions.

Studies by Lafferty *et al.* (2004), Bluemelhuber *et al.* (2007) and Helmig *et al.* (2007) support the impact of attitudes towards each alliance partner on attitudes towards the co-brand. However our results raise questions as to the stability of these findings and consequently support the differential patterns reported by Baumgarth (2004). Looking at the patterns of the first two rows of Table 1 leads us to the following conclusions:

- (a) Attitudes towards the top tier institutions are extremely high and uniform (e.g., Cambridge and Imperial College attract top attitude scores). The lack of variation results in non-significant relationships between attitudes towards A tier institutions and joint degrees offered by such institutions.
- (b) Unlike top tier institutions, there is spread of attitudes regarding those in the B tier, thus the significant relationship between the B tier and joint degrees with those in the A tier.
- (c) When a top tier institution collaborates with a C or D tier institution, our results suggest that the lower tier institution does not contribute to the formation of attitudes towards the collaboration. On the other hand, the negative relationship between the top tier institution and the collaboration indicates that from their (the top tier) perspective, such joint degrees are unwise.

The differential pattern of the partnerships under examination is also evident in terms of the impact of the collaboration on post-attitudes towards the collaborating brands. We, once again, support findings reported by Baumgarth (2004). Specifically, we find that collaboration between two top or a top and a second tier institutions have a positive effect on the post alliance attitudes towards such institutions. On the other hand, when a top tier institution engages in collaboration with a lower tier, i.e. C or D, this has no impact on the post attitudes towards the top tier institution; thus the A tier institution stand to gain little from such collaboration. Such collaborations become significant determinants of post attitudes only for the D tier institutions.

Implications, Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

Our findings reveal students' attitudes towards institutional brand alliances depending upon their differential rankings. The findings also give information about the impact of such collaborations on the attitudes towards the partnering institutional brands. Such knowledge can provide benchmark to the institutions planning to enter into alliances with other institution/s in the higher education sector. We also note that like other studies on the subject matter the results presented here are contingent upon the parameters of the adopted methodology and the proposed framework. More specifically, the following are considered to represent the main limitations of this study and offer avenues for future research: (a) the stability of the reported results for collaborations involving non-top tier institutions (e.g., B with other B or D tier institutions) need to be examined, (b) the methodology employed by the Guardian newspaper in ranking higher education institutions is open to debate and challenge, consequently the generalisability of our findings need to be confirmed through the adoption of alternative ranks, (c) related to the preceding point the location of individual institutions in a specific tier needs to be verified, and (d) personal characteristics of the respondents (e.g., past experiences, selection criteria etc.) should be included in future investigations.

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APPENDIX

Scale items

Pre and post alliance attitudes

What is your overall view of the <institution>:

Negative – Positive

Low Quality – High Quality

Poor Value for Money – Good Value for Money

Institutional fit:

They have different skills and resources that will combine well in a joint degree programme

They share similar goals and objectives and will work well together

Attitudes towards the joint degree:

The joint degree will be: High Quality

Good Value for Money

Popular

Better than most business degrees offered by other universities

Measures of Validity and Reliability

	Tier A with A	Tier A with B	Tier A with C	Tier A with E
Pre alliance attitudes				
CR	0.951	0.944	0.884	0.983
AVE	0.865	0.849	0.719	0.950
Institutional fit				
CR	0.874		0.944	0.868
AVE	0.777		0.894	0.767
Attitudes towards alliance				
CR	0.870		0.938	0.944
AVE	0.627		0.792	0.838
Post alliance attitudes				
CR	0.957	0.982	0.958	0.976
AVE	0.882	0.948	0.885	0.932