

Fostering HEI's international image and reputation through RDI activity

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| <p>Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are involved in an increasingly tightening competition for resources, and international research, development and innovation (RDI) projects have a crucial role in securing external funding. A positive image and reputation can create competitive advantage for HEIs seeking to increase the volume of international RDI activities.</p> <p>This research aims to understand how RDI activity contributes to the case organization, Turku University of Applied Sciences' (TUAS) image and reputation, and which factors mainly influence international RDI partners' perceptions of TUAS. The study focuses especially on international RDI stakeholders' views on TUAS' image and reputation. Thus, other forms of international cooperation, such as student and staff mobility or education export, are excluded from this study.</p> <p>The theory part of this study discusses the concepts of image, reputation and marketing communications in a higher education context. Image and reputation are studied in relation to competitive advantage, while marketing communications is discussed as a means of maintaining and developing image and reputation.</p> <p>The empirical part of this research was conducted as nine (9) semi-structured interviews to TUAS' international RDI partners. Based on the findings of the interviews and theoretical framework, the study concludes with recommendations to consider in TUAS' international marketing communications.</p> <p>The results of the interviews indicate that TUAS is highly appreciated as an RDI partner, has a positive image and enjoys a good reputation among the interviewees. Previous collaboration, personal relations and word-of-mouth are particularly significant to the interviewees' perception of TUAS. These insights form a basic framework for developing international marketing communications and fostering TUAS' image and reputation.</p> | |
| Keywords image, reputation, higher education, RDI, international marketing | |

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1 Introduction

Demographic changes, decreased state funding and international competition among other challenges have made Higher Education Institutions (HEI) increasingly dependent on external funding. In the competitive higher education landscape, a positive image and reputation among international stakeholders is key when applying for any of the major funding programs for research, development and innovation (RDI), such as the Erasmus+ or European Union's Horizon 2020.

The Ministry of Education and Culture's international strategy for higher education and research 2017 – 2025 underlines the internationalization of education and research:

The quality of Finland's higher education and research will derive from the country's genuinely international higher education community which is always ready to reform and adapt. International interaction and mobility to and from Finland will foster diversity in education and research. To ensure that this really takes place, each higher education institution will have a clear set of aims and supporting measures for internationalisation. International activities will permeate each higher education institution. (Ministry of Education and Culture 2018.)

Furthermore, a Ministerial Working Group on Competence, Education, Culture and Innovation has adopted a National Roadmap for RDI, which emphasizes the global attractiveness of the Finnish RDI environment. The measures in the roadmap aim to improve Finland's attractiveness among international researchers, experts and RDI professionals. (Ministry of Education and Culture 2020.)

While Turku University of Applied Sciences (hereby TUAS) has more than 200 on-going RDI projects on a yearly level, with about 30 percent of them international, few resources have been allocated to international marketing communications and reputation management. Furthermore, international marketing communications efforts, on an organizational level, are often focused on the mobility of students and staff or international degree programs. In order to stay relevant in international competition, it is important that TUAS recognizes the existing international networks and engages with them in a planned manner. By examining the perceptions of all stakeholders, including international RDI partners, TUAS can foster its image and reputation and better position itself within the competitive higher education landscape.

Several TUAS research groups consider good project partners and strong networks as one of the main factors in successful national and international funding applications and in implementing excellent research and development (Turku University of Applied Sciences 2018). As TUAS aims to increase the amount of international RDI projects, especially in the European Union's Horizon program, it is useful to explore how TUAS is perceived as a project partner, and what should be emphasized in its international marketing communications to foster image and reputation.

1.1 Background and research gap

The Finnish higher education system consists of universities and universities of applied sciences. While universities focus on scientific research and education based on it, universities of applied sciences have a more pragmatic approach and their emphasis is on applied research and development. (Ministry of Education and Culture 2019.) Research, development and innovation is a statutory task of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS). Their mission is to carry out RDI activities that serve working life and regional development. A significant part of these activities is conducted in RDI projects that include external funding sought by HEIs. RDI represents around 18 per cent of the entire volume of the activities conducted by universities of applied sciences. (Arene 2019.)

The case organization, Turku University of Applied Sciences (TUAS), is a multidisciplinary higher education institution with 9600 students and 700 staff members. TUAS emphasizes a working life -oriented approach with the combination of theoretical studies with professional skills. In addition to Bachelor's and Master's degree programs, TUAS provides training and consulting services for both individuals and organizations. TUAS represents the top tier in the country in the field of applied research by coordinating or acting as a partner in over 200 RDI projects yearly. Approximately 30 per cent of the RDI projects are international. (Turku University of Applied Sciences 2020.)

In 2015 the new University of Applied Sciences Act came into force, making TUAS among other Universities of Applied Sciences in Finland a legal person in the form of limited liability companies. The Act brought financial and administrative autonomy to UASs by introducing a new UAS funding reform. (Turku University of Applied Sciences 2014.) For many UASs, the funding reform meant reorganizing several operations, including research and development activities. At TUAS, faculty-based research centres were combined into a central RDI Services unit, which was led by RDI Manager. This model still exists today, having grown into a unit of more than 40 project advisors and specialists, who are mainly

in charge of coordinating TUAS' funding applications, managing projects and offering support and guidance for the entire life cycle of an RDI project. The RDI Services unit works in close cooperation with TUAS' 27 research groups, which combine various areas of expertise from the faculties of Engineering and Business, Health and well-being, Arts Academy and Corporate Services. In terms of received external funding for RDI projects, the year 2019 was TUAS' most successful so far, as the amount of external funding reached 10 million euros, with the total RDI budget being 12,5 million euros (Turku University of Applied Sciences 2020b).

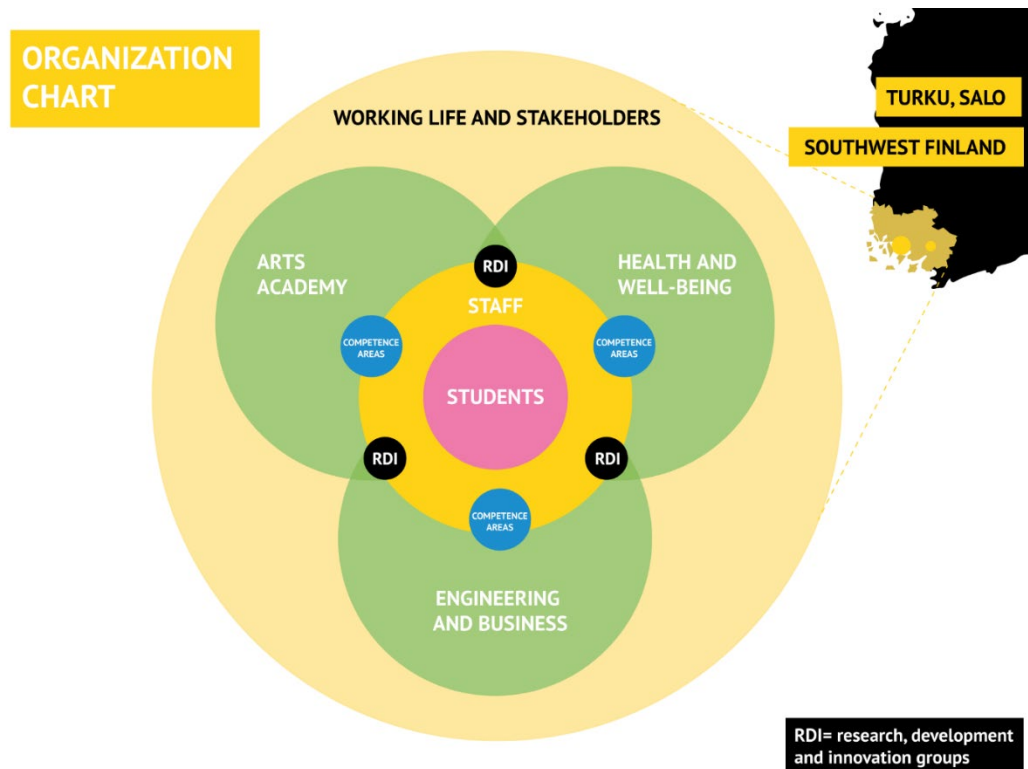


Figure 1. TUAS organization and management.

TUAS has been successful in receiving funding for international RDI projects from funding instruments such as Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020. However, there are still big differences in terms of activity in international RDI cooperation between different research groups. An internal research group activity report revealed that about a third of the research groups regarded international cooperation as their strength. Nevertheless, majority of the research groups indicated being somewhat active in international networks, mainly with other HEIs. According to the research groups, networking is mostly done on an individual level, and the research group members are more known for their expertise than the research group itself or TUAS as an organization. In this most recent report, based on a questionnaire conducted in 2018, the research groups considered 'increasing international

cooperation' as one of their top priorities for the year 2019. (Turku University of Applied Sciences 2019.)

TUAS' strategy for 2019-2031 emphasizes TUAS' role as a key actor in the regional development of Southwest Finland. In addition to improvement of regional well-being and quality of life, the strategy also highlights 'success in international competition' as an indicator of TUAS' success. (Turku University of Applied Sciences 2020.) The need to increase international RDI cooperation in order to retain competitiveness is recognized in the management level (Härkönen 2019, Krappe 2019, Pyörre 2019) and fueled by the Ministry of Education and Culture (2020). Hence, it is important that TUAS identifies the existing international networks and utilizes them to full potential.

The responsibilities regarding marketing communications of RDI are spread across TUAS in faculties, units and teams. Principally, each RDI project should communicate its results to stakeholders, but the level of communication efforts varies in each project. The Communications Services unit is responsible for TUAS' overall brand and marketing, developing communications in cooperation with the Communications Leaders of faculties. Furthermore, inside the RDI Services unit, an RDI communications team makes sure that the intranet, website and materials are kept up to date and TUAS' RDI activities don't go unnoticed.

While it may seem that there are a lot of actors contributing to the visibility of RDI activities at TUAS, no one is doing this full-time and roles and responsibilities are not always clear. The resources for international marketing communications are particularly scarce (Hartemo 2019). Furthermore, a lack of an internationalization strategy also influences international marketing communications, causing confusion about the objectives and focus points. (Hartemo 2019, Härkönen 2019, Krappe 2019.) TUAS has not defined any specific areas as target countries / regions and international marketing activities are usually done on a case-by-case basis – they are rather responsive than strategic.

TUAS' image and reputation among international students is examined to some extent by internal and external questionnaires and surveys. However, the perceptions of TUAS' extensive network of RDI partners has not previously been studied in depth. As TUAS aims

to increase the amount of international RDI projects, especially in the Horizon 2020 program¹ (Turku University of Applied Sciences 2019), it is useful to explore how TUAS is perceived as an RDI partner, and what could be improved in its international marketing communications in regard to image and reputation management.

1.2 Objectives and research questions

The objective of this study is to understand how RDI activity contributes to TUAS' international image and reputation, and which factors influence the international RDI partners' perceptions of TUAS. Based on the results of interviews conducted among international RDI partners and an overview of related literature and data, this study will conclude with findings and recommendations to consider in TUAS' international marketing communications.

Hence, the research aims to answer the following question: *What is the image and reputation of TUAS among international RDI partners?* Consequently, there are three sub questions:

- a. *Which elements are TUAS' image and reputation built / based on?*
- b. *How does TUAS differentiate from its competitors?*
- c. *What should be emphasized in TUAS' international marketing communications to foster image and reputation?*

The research objectives are approached by reviewing literature about image and reputation, marketing communications and international relations in the context of higher education. Based on a framework that builds on literature and related documentations, such as enquiries and internal reports, an empirical research is conducted focusing on TUAS' image and reputation among international RDI partners. The purpose of the empirical research is to understand which factors mainly influence the international RDI partners' perceptions of TUAS, and how the image and reputation could be improved.

While the case organization represents a higher education institution, it should be noted that much of the cited literature discusses image, reputation and international marketing communications in a corporate context.

¹ Horizon 2020 is the European Union's biggest funding programme for Research and Innovation with nearly EUR 80 billion of funding available over 7 years (2014 to 2020). Funding is mainly granted to research and innovation projects that are carried out as international collaborations. Submitted project proposals are reviewed by invited experts by the European commission, and only the best proposals will be funded. (Academy of Finland 2020.)

1.3 The scope and structure of the thesis

This research will focus on discussing TUAS' image and reputation from the international RDI partners' perspective. While the management's views of current state are briefly examined through email enquiries and discussions, this thesis will not further investigate TUAS' internal stakeholders' perceptions of its image and reputation or compare the internal and external image. Furthermore, the research will not result in an international marketing communications strategy or a detailed communications plan.

The outcome of this thesis is a review on international RDI partners' perceptions of TUAS and a list of recommendations to consider in the development of TUAS' international marketing communications. While international RDI cooperation and RDI partners' perceptions are naturally emphasized in this research, the resulting recommendations are not targeted to any specific unit / team at TUAS. The research aims to contribute to the awareness of a certain stakeholder group's views, and through that develop international marketing communications throughout the organization.

In chapter 1, the case organization, research gap, objectives and research questions are introduced. In chapters 2 and 3, the key concepts, image, reputation and marketing communications are discussed through a literature review to build a theoretical understanding of how image and reputation are formed, and how they relate to marketing communications. Furthermore, the concepts are discussed in the context of higher education and contrasted to TUAS' current state. The theoretical framework emphasizes image and reputation as an asset that can bring competitive advantage, while marketing communications is discussed as a means of maintaining and developing image and reputation.

In chapter 4 the research methodology is discussed. First, the qualitative research method is introduced and the adaption of case study as a research strategy is explained. Chapter 4.2 presents the research implementation from data collection to analyses. In chapter 5, the research findings are discussed in relation to the themes of semi-structured interviews, which presented the empirical part of this thesis. Based on the research findings, chapter 6 introduces recommendations to consider in TUAS' international marketing communications.

Finally, the evaluation of reliability and validity and the researcher's learning outcomes are discussed in chapter 7. The study concludes with a reflection of the thesis process and suggestions for future research.

2 Image and reputation as a competitive advantage

Image, reputation, brand and identity are all closely related constructs and often used as synonyms. Research on branding in higher education has grown in the recent years and some of the cited literature also touches the topic, but as the focus of this thesis is the image and reputation of TUAS, these concepts are examined more closely in this chapter. However, a brief explanation of the related concepts by Percy (2014) is offered below.

In corporate context, identity is described as symbols and words used to identify a company to its target audience, and how the employees see the company. Corporate image concerns the target audience's beliefs and feelings about the company. Corporate reputation reflects the values its target audiences associate with their understanding of the image. Finally, all these are a part of corporate meaning, i.e. corporate brand. In order to build a successful corporate brand, it is critical that a consensual image be built among target audiences, one that accurately represents the company and is consistent with the overall corporate strategy. This can be attained by effective integrated marketing communications (discussed more in chapter 3). Figure 2 shows the relations of identity, image, reputation and brand, and acts as an umbrella covering all the organization's marketing activity and communication with its stakeholders. (Percy 2014, 63; 69-71.)

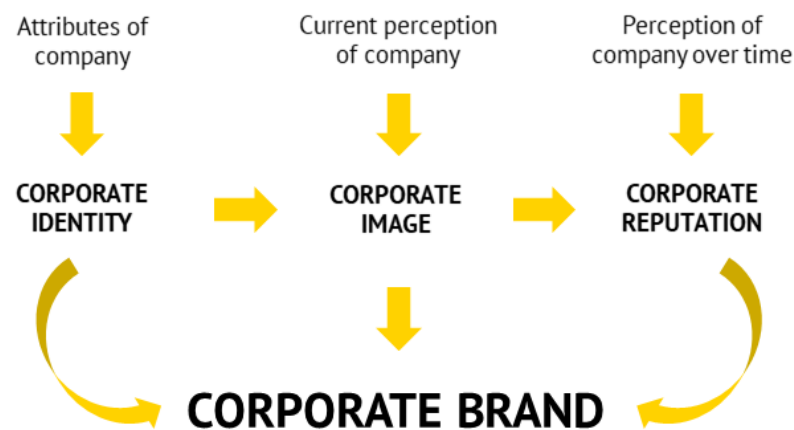


Figure 2. Relations of corporate identity, image, reputation and brand. (Adapted from Percy 2014)

2.1 Defining image and reputation

Reputation refers to rather stable shared perceptions of how the general public feels about an organization, whereas image is mainly cognitively oriented, dealing with a person's own knowledge and more transient beliefs about an organization. Organizational images develop over long periods of time, resulting from, e.g. media coverage and the organization's own communications. Image and reputation should not be confused with an organization's identity, which is what insiders, usually the employees, perceive as the central, enduring and distinctive characteristics of the organization. Identity is the reality of an organization and its principal components consist of strategy, philosophy, culture and organizational design. (Lievens 2017, Gray & Balmer 1998, 695.)

Van Riel (2013) defines reputation as the degree of admiration, positive feelings, and trust an individual has for an organization. It is affected by cues from the organization itself, peers, media and from personal experience. Positive reputation matters and can give advantages with certain stakeholders such as financial audiences, governments, customers, labour market and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Several studies show that a solid reputation can decrease costs and thus create competitive advantage, whereas organizational reputation problems are not easy to solve, and they open up serious challenges for corporate communications managers. Thus, fostering positive reputation is crucial for organizations. (Van Riel 2013, 15-18.)

Positive reputation can affect the following organizational matters:

- justification of the organization's existence
- arousing interest
- differentiating from competitors
- stakeholders' decision-making: e.g. decisions to buy, invest or enter a partnership
- influencing opportunities in general.

Furthermore, it is increasingly important for organizations to communicate "corporate social responsibility" (CSR) in order to foster positive reputation. CSR is based on the idea that corporations act economically, environmentally and socially in a responsible manner to justify their existence. Making CSR visible can be challenging – therefore organizations should constantly follow public discussion and engage with their stakeholders to make sense of their expectations, and contrarily, bring forth the organizational views for the stakeholders' evaluation. The key is to integrate CSR activities to all corporate communications. (Juholin 2009, 188-190.)

Indeed, reputations partly emerge from the way an organization engages with its stakeholders. Thus, Schreiber (2011) proposes two definitions for reputation: one from the organization's perspective and the other from the stakeholders' perspective. From the organizational perspective, reputation is an intangible asset allowing better stakeholder management and differentiation from competitors. From the stakeholder perspective, reputation is the intellectual, emotional and behavioral response to the organization's actions and communications. (Schreiber 2011.)

The essential difference in the terms 'image' and 'reputation' is that images concern immediate impressions while reputations are more enduring over time (Grunig 1993; Williams & Moffitt 1997; both in Harrison-Walker 2009). Gray & Balmer (1998) also stated that image is the immediate mental picture in the minds of audiences and can be fashioned quickly through effective communications, when reputation evolves over time as a result of consistent performance. Typically, an organization has multiple images, as various stakeholders hold different images of the same organization (Lievens 2017). For instance, in a HEI setting, a student, an employee and an RDI partner might hold different images of the HEI, as they evaluate the HEI's performance based on different needs.

It is important to remember that images are not static, and many organizations aim to strategically modify the images held by stakeholders. By auditing its image, an organization can determine which factors make up the image, and then, e.g. increase its exposure or highlight specific attributes through marketing communications (Lievens 2017). Furthermore, reputations are not fixed forever and organization's actions and changes in the context they operate can affect reputation greatly (van Riel 2013, 15). Over time, organizations can increase their reputation resilience by meeting the needs and interests of stakeholders (Schreiber 2011).

Corporate identity and corporate image are terms often confused with each other. Wood and Somerville (2012) define corporate identity as something that the organization communicates, intentionally or unintentionally, via various cues, whereas image is how the public actually views it. I.e., images are the public's interpretations of an organization's identity, and they are formulated in wide contexts, with broad frames of reference. Therefore, an organization cannot fully control its image, but a well-managed corporate identity is better than a neglected identity, which may result in sending out the wrong messages and contributing to a confused image. Consequently, reputation is something that belongs to the receiver, not the sender. (Wood and Somerville (2012, 128-129.) The relationships between the concepts of identity, image and reputation are mapped in Figure 3.

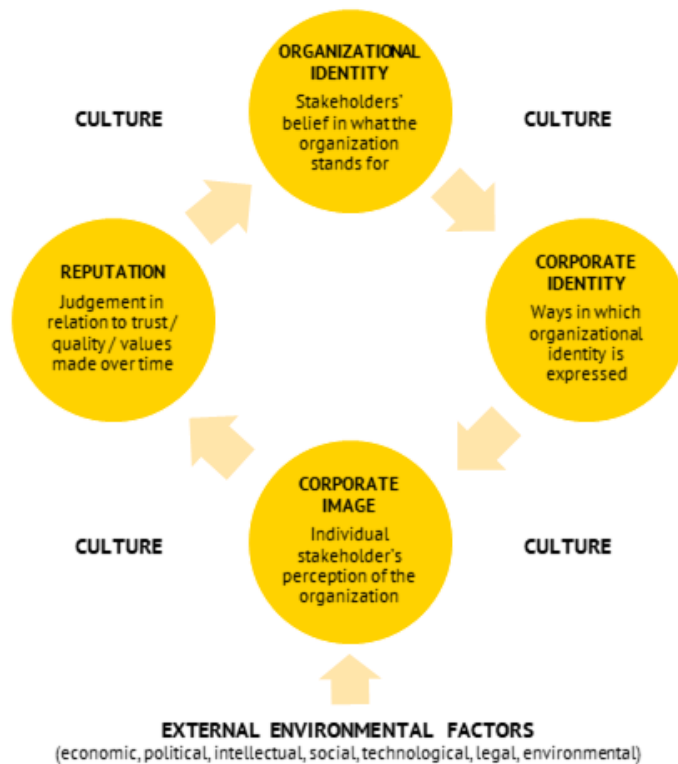


Figure 3. Relationship between concepts. (Adapted from Wood and Somerville 2012)

In their effort to synthesize existing research and theory on identity, intended image, construed image and reputation, Brown et al. (2006) identify four central “viewpoints” of an organization. The viewpoints with key questions and connection flows are described in figure 4 and explained in the following paragraphs.

Viewpoint 1 deals with **Member organization associations and identity**. Individual organizational members can hold almost a limitless amount of different associations with respect to an organization. However, these associations only serve as the reality of the organization for the individual holding them. Organization identity, according to most scholars, is the property of a social group rather than an individual. (Brown et al. 2006.)

Viewpoint 2 is about **intended associations and intended image** and refers to the set of associations and image that an organization’s management wants a particular stakeholder group to hold. Viewpoint 3, **construed associations and construed image** refer to the mental associations that organization members believe outsiders hold about the organization. Moreover, these beliefs can affect the way organization members themselves view and respond to the organization. (Brown et al. 2006.)

Finally, viewpoint 4, **Corporate (Organizational) associations and Reputation** captures the set of associations and perceptions individuals outside an organization believe are central, enduring and distinctive aspects to the organization, thus separating reputation from image, which concerns what an organizations member wants (or believes) others to know. (Brown et al. 2006.)

To sum, for a HEI to develop its image and manage reputation, it is important to distinguish these different viewpoints and understand that image often origins from within the organization (see figure 4) as either intended or construed, while several outside forces can influence the reputation. Hence, the organization does not “own” its reputation and managing such an outside asset can be challenging.

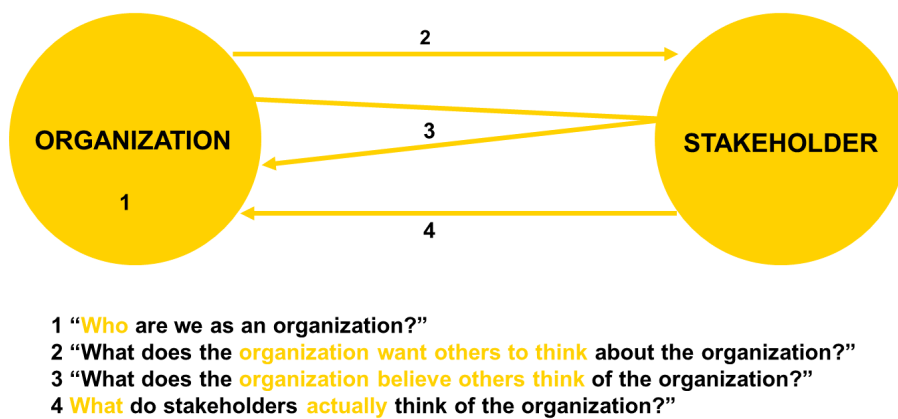


Figure 4. Key organizational Viewpoints. (Adapted from Brown et al. 2006)

2.2 Managing image and reputation

Reputation is built in everyday encounters. The way an organization’s member communicates with a stakeholder can have a long-term impact to the organization’s reputation – in both good and bad (Juholin 2009, 196). Hence, identifying and analyzing different stakeholders is key in reputation management.

The objective of reputation is to build value for the organization through business outcomes. An organization can control its brand, purpose and values, which have an impact on reputation, but eventually reputation derives from real or perceived delivery, rather than promise. Thus, managing reputation requires a holistic approach inside the organization, and everyone needs to be involved. However, evidence shows that reputation is not as

actively managed an asset as it should be: some of the biggest companies have little or no crisis management structure in place. This is partly because reputation as a concept is not fully understood, and it is sometimes confused e.g. with image, brand and values. (Schreiber 2011, Griffin 2014, 2-4.)

Kim et al. (2008) also argue that reputation can only be managed by managing the behavior of the organization. Hence, public relations professionals should participate in the governance that produces organizational behaviors. Involved publics (behavioral relationship holders) mostly view brand and reputation as by-products of relational interactions with an organization. However, the involved publics influence the less-involved groups (reputational relationship holders) through their communicative actions, such as recommendations. Hence, public relations professionals have an important role in identifying behavioral relationship holders and incorporating their interests into management decisions, thus indirectly influencing reputation relationships holders. Moreover, digital media has amplified the threats and opportunities to a brand or reputation among involved as well as less-involved publics. (Kim et al. 2008, 209-210.)

Indeed, the speed of digital news media is overwhelming, and organizations are likely to hit a reputational crisis sooner than later. Crisis management is essentially communicative, and it's important to understand how words and actions influence the way stakeholders react to the crisis and how the crisis may alter the organization's reputation. Social media provides suitable tools for managing reputation and reputational crises, since organisations can actively listen and analyse online conversations, and act upon when needed. It is highly valuable to create and promote dialogue in social media and utilize the dialogic opportunities those provide with stakeholders. (Romenti & Murtarelli 2013, 12; Coombs et al. 2010, 337.)

According to Griffin (2014, 8), shifting from reputation management to reputation strategy requires maintaining, enhancing, protecting and utilizing reputation for the achievement of business goals and to create long-term shareholder value. Succeeding in everyday performance and delivering on brand promises helps to maintain and enhance reputation, but also to protect it by building reputational capital for possible future crises or issues. Protecting reputation is about actively making sure that reputation is in the room when key decisions are taken to crisis management manuals, training and testing. Finally, a good reputation should be utilized to achieve strategic goals. This can be done e.g. through policy, positioning and public affairs programs: contributing to debates and leveraging relationships to influence policy. (Griffin 2014, 8-9.)

Gray & Balmer's (1998) operational model for managing image and reputation proposes that the fundamental components of the process are identity, communication, and – perhaps less surprisingly – image and reputation. In short, an organization's identity is translated into an image in the eyes of its stakeholders through communications, and over time, reputational attributes emerge. The model suggests that feedback and correction are essential to the efficacy of the process, and that the output of the process can be competitive advantage. (Gray & Balmer 1998, 965-696.)

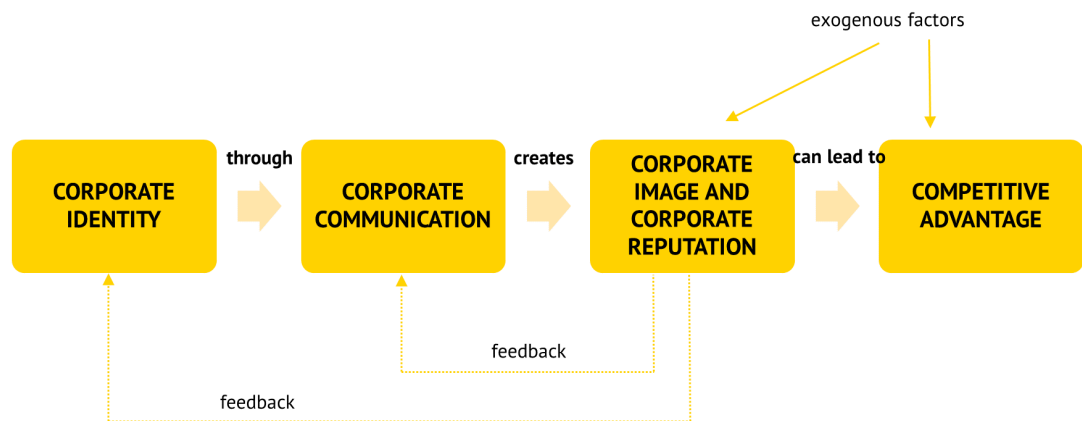


Figure 5. Operational model for managing corporate reputation and image. (Adapted from Gray & Balmer 1998, 696)

This simplified model offers a good basic frame for image and reputation management and highlights the role of communications as an interactive function in managing organizational reputation. While corporate communications and image and reputation are intertwined concepts, the responsibility of managing image and reputation does not belong to communications practitioners alone. As discussed previously, to achieve strategic goals and competitive advantage, a holistic organizational approach is required since image and reputation are built in everyday encounters.

In figure 6, Juholin (2009, 195), also emphasizes image management as a continuous process, which begins by identifying an organization's mission and personality (1) and intended image (2). By comparing the identity and intended image with stakeholders' views (3), the organization can decide which characteristics to emphasize in its communications, assuming that they are in line with the mission and goals (4). Finally, these decisions are transformed to strategic policies that define the organization's communications, actions and visual appearance (5).

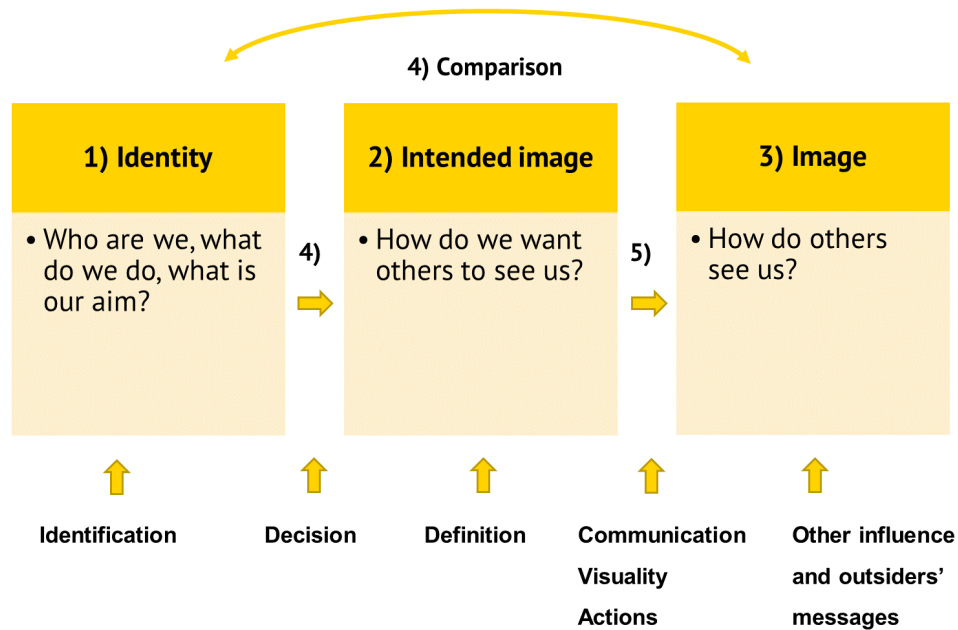


Figure 6. Phases in image management. (Adapted from Juholin 2009, 195)

Juholin (2009, 195) stresses the importance of stakeholder-oriented approach in image management. It is not so relevant to know what the organization's image and reputation on average is, but what kind of images different stakeholders hold, and what are those images based on: fact, rumors, one's own or others' experiences. Achieving this level of awareness requires continuous research and examination from the organization.

Hatch and Schultz (2001) discuss image in the context of company branding strategy, stating that three critical elements must be aligned to create and maintain a brand: vision, culture and image. Vision is about the top management's aspirations for the company, whereas culture reflects the organization's values and behavior, i.e., how the employees feel about the company. Image, as discussed previously, concerns the outside world's overall impression of the company. "The Corporate Branding Tool Kit" (Figure 7), introduced by Hatch and Schultz (2001) helps managers to identify the key problem areas in brand building: the vision-culture gap, the image-culture-gap and the image-vision gap. The gap-analyses must be conducted concurrently, and the investigation can be complex and time-consuming, but aligning the elements can result the brand becoming a powerhouse. (Hatch & Schulz 2001.)

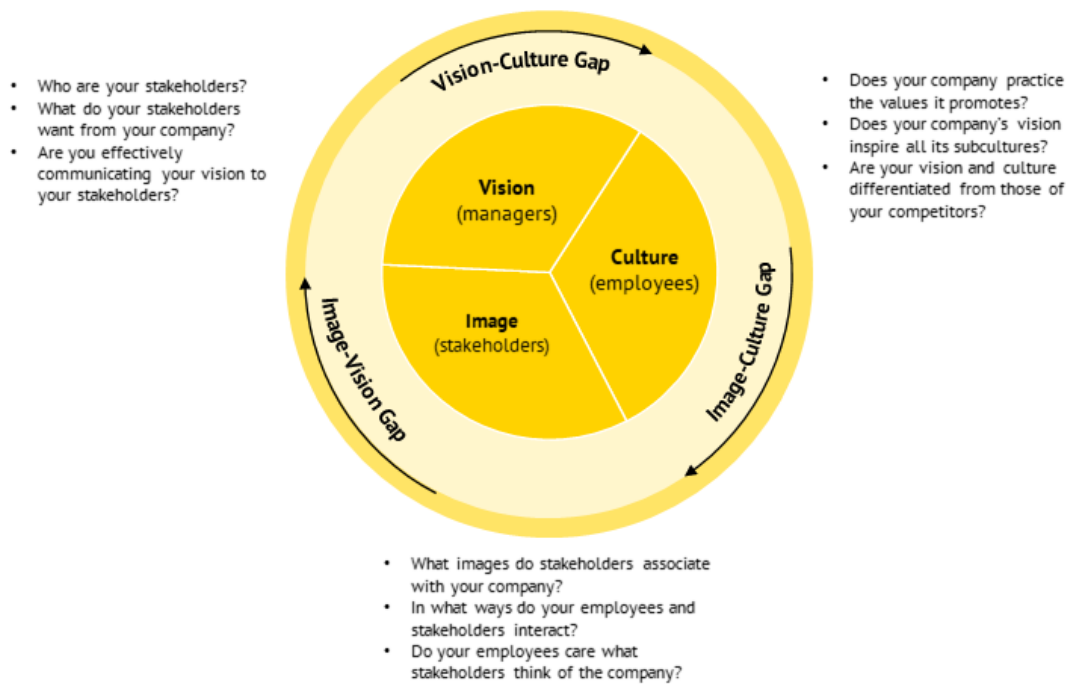


Figure 7. The corporate Branding Tool Kit. (Adapted from Hatch & Schulz 2001)

This thesis touches Hatch & Schultz's framework (2001) by examining specifically the image-culture gap, i.e. what images do stakeholders associate with TUAS and in what ways do TUAS employees and RDI partners interact. Hatch & Schultz (2001) highlight the importance of direct, personal encounters in creating positive images and warn about organizational silos in stakeholder engagement:

“Consider the potential for misalignment when marketing talks to customers, HR talks to employees, public relations talks to the media, but the departments don't talk to one another.”

Indeed, internal communications and removing silos from communicative functions can narrow down the image-culture gap. The key in identifying image-culture gaps is to compare what employees are saying with what external stakeholders are saying. If a company doesn't “practice what it preaches”, its image gets tarnished among key stakeholders. (Hatch & Schulz 2001.)

A research conducted by Gassman et al. (2010), found that a corporate research and development (R&D) lab's reputation directly impacts the company's brand value, and reputation management is an important factor in attracting partners and external funding. Moreover, a corporate R&D organization's willingness to take risks has a positive impact on a

prospective partner's decision to enter a partnership. Publications in popular or academic media and attending conferences in addition to individual researchers' open mindset, flexibility and risk orientation are key elements in successful reputation management. Furthermore, professional research communication is immensely important in positioning a company and its corporate R&D, and a clear media strategy should therefore be developed. (Gassman et al. 2010.)

In line with the findings of Gassman et al. (2010), being "crazy enough" to take on challenges is also seen as a factor that affects TUAS' attractiveness as an RDI partner positively (Krappe 2019, Pyörre 2019). In the higher education context, professional research communication is something that cannot be entirely delegated to the central communications department, even if it oversees the overall media strategy. Researchers and project actors themselves should also be aware of the most effective communications channels in their respective field and draft at least a basic communications plan for every project.

To sum, managing image and reputation is continuous task that requires careful examination of stakeholders' perceptions and attitudes as well as planned marketing communications. Furthermore, in the time of social media, internal stakeholders, i.e. employees, and their personal connections are ever so important in maintaining a desired image and good reputation. Therefore, managing image and reputation is also about managing people and culture.

At TUAS, stakeholders' views are quite regularly measured through different kinds of surveys and questionnaires. For instance, Taloustutkimus market research company conducts a yearly research on Finnish HEIs' image and reputation among under 30-year-old respondents. This gives valuable information to consider in marketing communications targeting Finnish applicants and young adults, and TUAS has a systematic approach to benefiting from the research results. However, as stated previously, there is little research about the image and reputation of TUAS among international partners. This study aims to bring forth the international RDI partners' perceptions of TUAS and thus provide more tools for image and reputation management.

2.3 Image and reputation in higher education

Reputation has long been a normal discourse in the business world, but in recent years reputation thinking has expanded beyond boardrooms and become a valued asset in all organizations. Governmental and non-profit organizations alike understand that their funding, ability to attract and retain talent and their survival can depend on their reputation.

Since there are numerous examples of organizations that have experienced reputation-damaging crises, reputation is often seen as something to be protected. Nevertheless, reputation should also be viewed positively as a valuable strategic asset that requires proactive thinking. (Griffin 2014, 1.)

Today, HEIs face the challenge of differentiating themselves from competitors and rethinking their strategies in a more “business-like” setting. Knowledge-based organizations with intangible products, such as HEIs, seem extremely dependent on a good reputation (Gottschalk 2011, 27). Institutional reputation is a key influencer of consumer decisions in higher education, and strong brand is a key component by which the reputation of an organization can be managed. Reputation management should thus be incorporated into the strategic vision of the organization. (Marine & Gibbs 2009, 145.)

Kantanen (2011, 67) argues that strong organizational identities contribute to clear profiles and make stakeholder communications easier, whereas diffused identities, such in the case of fluctuating boundaries of traditional universities and UASs, can cause problems. This study will not focus on the differences between traditional universities and Universities of Applied Sciences, but it is worth noting that while Finnish UASs regional development role and relations to industry might be clear among national stakeholders, this might not always be the case among international stakeholders. However, some UASs may have stronger organizational identities than others, and thus shouldn't be generalized as having diffused identities.

Images of HEIs are formed based on how well they succeed in fulfilling their basic responsibilities: research, teaching and service. Stakeholders form images through experiences with the HEI, but also through the information they receive about it, either directly or through mediators like the media or other people. (Kantanen 2011.) For HE brand managers working in the competitive global environment, a deep understanding of concepts such as brand identity, meaning, image, and reputation can contribute towards resource efficacy, cost-saving, and increased income from multiple sources. Furthermore, being able to demonstrate the financial impact of reputation is ever so important, as there is an increasing demand for proof of return-on-investment (ROI) on communication programs. Communicators should take an active role in defining organizational values and assuring that the values are truly “first-order” values, intrinsic to the organization. Communications is an essential part of reputation management, but more importantly, an organization builds its reputation through its actions. (Hemsley-Brown et al. 2016, 320; Schreiber 2011).

Bourke (2000) also argues that in the higher education context, organizational culture and reputation are important sources of competitive advantage. As it often is difficult to evaluate services quality in very thorough manner, reputation is used as a screening mechanism for service providers. Indeed, international higher education rankings have aimed to rank HEIs based solely on their quality, but there is debate concerning the methodology used because the HEIs with a very strong reputation tend to stay on top, independent of the measured factors.

Introduced by the massification of higher education and gaining volume in the digital age, HEI rankings have attracted criticism from diverse stakeholders for embracing only 1 per cent of the world's universities and focusing mostly on scientific research. On the positive side, rankings address to the growing demand for accessible and relatively simple information on the "quality of higher education institutions". The ranking information is accessible to all relevant HEI stakeholders; the students and their parents, donors, policymakers, private sector, faculty and universities themselves. Nevertheless, rankings should not be used as the sole source guiding decisions related to the quality of HEIs. Since ranking performance can positively impact on funding and partnerships, there is a legitimate concern of HEIs inflating their performance in order to succeed in the rankings. (Marope & Wells 2013, 11-15.)

HEIs are generally recognized as key drivers for economic growth, global competitiveness and democracy. However, HEI rankings tend to emphasize the performance of individual institutions and thus lack an adequate measure of the overall strength of a country's tertiary education system. It is important to assess how a country is up to key dimensions of performance such as access and equity, quality and relevance, research productivity and technology transfer. As an alternative to rankings, benchmarking allows comparing HE systems based on the stages of development, region or political context. Comparing indicators across countries can be used to ascertain policy options, inform decision-making and guide resource allocation. (Salmi 2013, 236; 241; 254.)

In a 2016 report by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), Bahram Bekhradnia also argues that universities and governments should ignore international HEI rankings when deciding their priorities, policies and actions because they are methodologically flawed and almost exclusively measure research performance. He raises two particular issues related to the reliability of the data gathered for HEI rankings: First, the quality of the data used in the rankings is uncertain as HEIs supply their own data without being subject to proper audit, or worse, the ranking engages in data scraping using data over whose ori-

gins there is no control. Second, reputation surveys are used to bulk up the basis for rankings in the absence of meaningful data. There are doubts over the samples used and whether the surveys provide meaningful indicators of quality. Moreover, presenting the results in an ordinal list from first to last can be seriously misleading and exaggerate the significance of very small differences. However, since a commercial interest in HEI rankings exists, there is little possibility to halt their rise. (Bekhradnia 2016, 16-17; 23.)

Since the focus of global HEI rankings is typically on scientific research, it raises the question of usability to many Universities of Applied Sciences, for whom the focus is more on applied research and development activities. Generally, UASs do not appear high (if at all) in global HEI rankings. However, a HEI ranking called Webometrics forms an exception as being “the only ranking of all universities in the world” (Ranking Web of Universities 2020). Webometrics ranks HEIs based on their web presence and impact, ranking TUAS on place 13 out of 41 Finnish HEIs and the first University of Applied Sciences in the ranking for Finnish HEIs. For comparison, in the world ranking of Webometrics, TUAS lists as number 3347, when Helsinki University, receiving the highest scores among Finnish HEIs, is number 86 in the world rank. (Ranking Web of Universities 2020.) It is debatable whether this ranking provides any value to a particular HEI, but TUAS’ score indicates a relatively high level of web presence compared to other Finnish HEIs.

Sasu Tuominen’s dissertation (2011) examines the effect of corporate image and reputation on potential students’ intention to apply to a university. While the research found that image and reputation affect only moderately on potential students’ intention to apply to a university, the effect of normative reference groups on students’ intention to apply was stronger. Tuominen’s dissertation contributes to the existing research on image and reputation in a higher education context and underlines the importance of personal encounters and contacts in HEI marketing. Strong image and reputation can affect positively on the behavior of stakeholders, but for a complex service product like higher education, the recommendations of reference groups and academic performance are particularly important. (Tuominen 2011, 99-101.)

Indeed, personal contacts and previous experience in addition to the quality of RDI activities and the geographical location seem to play a big role in the attractiveness of TUAS as an international partner (Hartemo 2019, Härkönen 2019, Krappe 2019, Pyörre 2019). Finland is well known abroad for its excellent basic education and PISA results, which can create general interest towards partnerships with Finnish HEIs. For Universities of Applied Sciences, international HEI rankings are not yet a relevant indicator of quality, but perhaps

something that shouldn't be completely ignored either, as the volume of RDI activity in UASs rises.

3 Marketing communications

As discussed in the previous chapter, image and reputation are both evolving concepts that an organization cannot fully control. However, an organization can control the messages it sends and thus, influence the way images and reputations are formed. This chapter addresses the theoretical background of marketing communications and its role in building image and reputation. The main concepts are reflected on TUAS' situation.

3.1 The concept of marketing communications

All organisations, regardless of their size and mission, need to communicate with stakeholders in order to pursue their objectives. While there is no universally agreed definition of marketing communications, it has been conceptualised from the promotional perspective, where communications is used to persuade people to buy products and services. The expression 'marketing communications' has emerged along with the evolving tools and media, as well as the expanding scope of communications activities. (Fill 2011, 5-9.)

Since the mid-1990s the focus of marketing communications has shifted from mass to personal, and many definitions now refer to an integrated perspective, where a stronger strategic and long-term orientation has developed. Personal communications involve transferring a message to certain known and individually addressed persons, while mass communications is about using mass media to reach a broad audience, where the receivers cannot be identified. Marketing communications aim at influencing or persuading a target audience by conveying a message. The essential goal of marketing communications is to provoke an audience response. (Fill 2011, 5-9, Pelsmacker et al. 2013, 5.) Hence, in a higher education context, the aim of international marketing communications could be, for instance, to attract new RDI partners or international students in order to secure the institution' funding and / or improve competitiveness.

Marketing communications is an audience centred activity used to communicate elements of an organisation's offering to a target audience. Successful marketing communications involves mixing tools, media and messages into a combination that engages target audiences. Collectively these elements are referred to as marketing communications mix. There are five principal marketing communications tools: advertising, sales promotion, public relations, direct marketing and personal selling. Direct and interactive marketing actions and personal selling count for personal communications, whereas all other tools are mass communications. Tools and media should not be confused as they seek to achieve

different goals, i.e. media is a means through which messages are conveyed. (Fill 2011, 16); Next, the marketing communications tools are described in further detail.

Advertising is a non-personal form of mass communication where the sender has a high degree of control over the design and delivery of advertising messages. That being said, whether advertising can persuade the target audience to behave in a particular way, is suspect. Advertising's effect on sales is also very difficult to measure. Furthermore, audiences are more likely to believe messages received through other tools and word-of-mouth communication, than they are messages received through advertising. Advertising is a flexible tool that can be used to communicate with a national audience or a specialized segment, and the cost per contact can be the lowest of all the tools in the marketing communications mix. (Fill 2011, 18.)

Sales promotion aims to accelerate sales and gather marketing information. The associated costs in sales promotion can be much lower than those of advertising, and it has a greater capacity to target smaller audiences. Sales promotion suffers low credibility, as the sponsor's goals are easy to identify. (Fill 2011,18)

Personal selling traditionally involves interpersonal activities undertaken by individuals who are representing an organization, in order to inform, persuade or remind an individual or a group to take appropriate action. The costs of interpersonal communication are normally very high and the control in personal selling is lower than in advertising. A single salesperson can deliver many different messages, which may either enhance the prospect of objectives being reached or retard the process and thus incur more time and costs. (Fill 2011, 18-19.)

Fill's definition of personal selling dates back to 2011, but it is important to remember the new dimension that social media has brought to personal selling. As discussed in chapter 2, every encounter is meaningful for an organization's reputation, but today the encounters increasingly take place in different online social networks, such as LinkedIn. Balancing between private and work profiles can be challenging for the employee, but also risky in the cases where a large gap exists between an organization's internal and external image. Diffused boundaries 'between' work and 'personal' can contribute to a diffused organizational image.

Public relations aim to establish and maintain various stakeholder relationships and enhance the reputation of an organization. Publicity requires the dissemination of messages through third-party media and while there is no charge for the media space or time, the

production of the material incurs costs. Event management, public affairs, sponsorship and lobbying also count among the wide range of tools used by public relations. Messages conveyed through public relations can be very effective, since a third-party endorsement generally has a far greater impact on the target audience than any other tool in the marketing communications mix. (Fill 2011, 19.)

Direct marketing targets individuals with the intention of delivering personalized messages and building a partnership in a direct and personal basis. Emerged in the 1990s, direct marketing tools such as e-mails, telephone conversations and direct mail letters have replaced the traditional salespersons' tasks. (Fill, 20-21.)

In the context of international RDI activities at TUAS, personal selling and public relations have a central role in marketing communications. Both tools require harnessing the communications skills of individuals who work with international relations, as well as making sure that promotional materials are up to date. Advertising, sales promotion and direct marketing are more commonly used on a national level to attract degree students or customers for continuous education or services. In addition to personal relations and networking, TUAS' website, social media and international events are regarded as most relevant marketing communications channels regarding RDI activities. Also printed materials, handouts and presentations that employees use when promoting TUAS abroad should be kept up to date. (Hartemo 2019, Härkönen 2019, Krappe 2019, Pyörre 2019.)

3.1.1 Integrated marketing communications

Noting that there is no single agreed definition of integrated marketing communications (IMC), Fill & Turnbull (2016, 326) explain the emergence of IMC as a response to the increased levels of interaction with customers, a trend moving communications away from mass-media approaches. They recognize three main drivers for the rising interest in IMC: market-based, communications-based and organization-based drivers.

From a market perspective, the reorientation from transaction-based marketing to relationship marketing forces organizations to gather a deeper understanding of their customers. In order to enhance trust and commitment, external communications should be consistent and coordinated to avoid information overload and misunderstandings. From a communications perspective the key driver is to differentiate and provide meaningful brand associations to customers. With clear and simplified marketing communications, advantages can be attained. From an organizational perspective, IMC is seen as way to increase efficiency and reduce costs by creating synergistic advantages. (Fill & Turnbull 2016, 326-

328.) To sum, integrated marketing communications should aim for a unified, consistent set of messages because audiences receive messages about brands from various different information sources. Figure 8 shows some of the fundamental elements that need integrating.

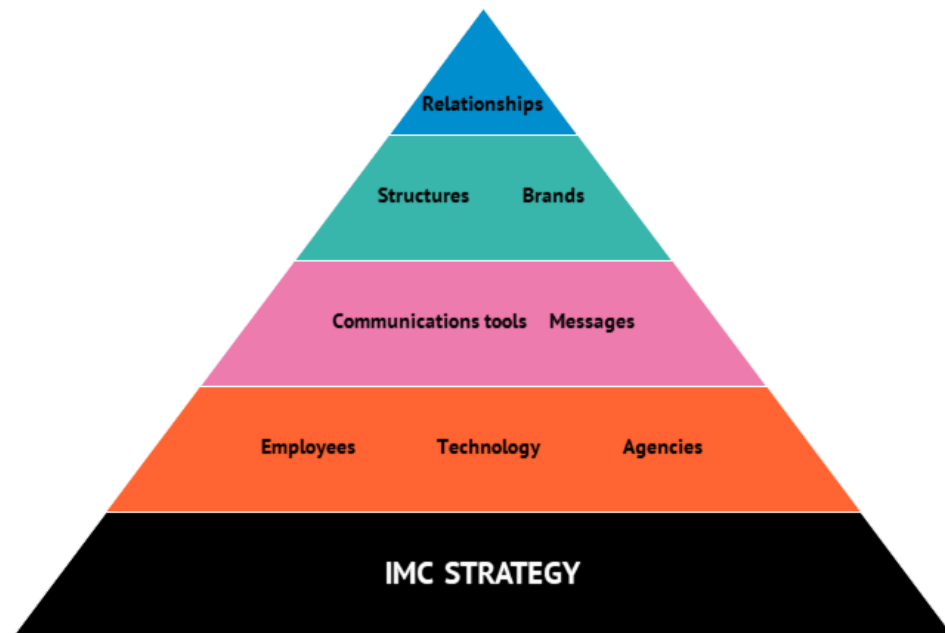


Figure 8. Marketing communications elements of to be integrated. (Adapted from Fill & Turnbull 2016)

As discussed in previous chapters, an organization cannot fully control its image. Percy (2014), however, argues that an IMC program can bring a significant level of control over the resulting image. If an organization communicates about itself and its brands with a consistent, viable strategy, the image will, by time, reflect that communication. People's successful processing of a consistent message from the organization will result in the desired image. Moreover, IMC is about minimizing the chance of multiple interpretations, and instead, ensuring that all the organization's communication consistently reinforce the desired image. Consequently, the established image should be linked to values important to the organization's target audiences, because the perception of shared values will lead to positive reputation. (Percy 2014, 58-59.) Thus, the role of IMC in forming an organization's image and reputations is critical.

While the need for IMC may be widely understood and accepted, many organizations face barriers they need to overcome before they can successfully implement IMC. These barriers

ers might be related to organizational structure, organizational character or compensations issues. For instance, organizational silos and vertical structure might challenge needed cooperation between functions, there is no common understanding of IMC or a resistance to change exists. Furthermore, communication specialists that lose budget control may fear of losing their position or financial rewards. The key for managers to overcome these problems is to identify them within one's own organization. (Percy 2014, 17-18.)

Gruen (2005, 179-180) also notes that having a totally integrated communications program can be complicated, since many functions inside the organization share responsibility of communications. Thus, he argues that an organization's website, gathering all the messages targeted to different stakeholder groups, provides a place where IMC can truly deliver communication effectiveness.

At TUAS, a significant step towards integrated marketing communications was taken in 2015, when a Brand Manager was recruited as the head of Communication Services. Before this, communications and marketing were very much separate functions, led by two different managers who had different aims and objectives in their jobs. Now one unit is responsible of TUAS' brand and marketing, working in close cooperation with communication professionals in faculties. This has led to a more strategical approach in marketing communications – there are less disjointed messages and duplicative work. However, scarce resources and the lack of coordination in international marketing communications (among other areas) still create challenges for IMC (Hartemo 2019).

3.1.2 Word-of mouth

Word-of-mouth has been around for as long as people have engaged in conversations. The best way to leverage the conversation among stakeholders involves engaging the audience with interesting content and by providing them added value. Word-of-mouth may be positive, negative, or neutral and it can occur offline or online (Silverman, Westbrook, Womma in Kimmel 2013).

A positive example of word-of-mouth would be a recommendation, whereas a negative example would be to advice against something. Neutral word-of-mouth may be conveying something without advising to act one way or another. The key differences in offline and online word-of-mouth lie in the level of trust: Offline WOM is often referred to as more intimate because of the personal implication in the conversation, thus resulting in higher trust levels. Online WOM is characterized as more of an indirect form of influence that occurs

mainly written, giving the audience more opportunities to access a variety of information and to process it. To conclude, offline WOM could be considered more powerful, whereas online WOM is more versatile. (Kimmel 2013.)

The distinguishing feature of WOM is that the communicator has little or no commercial vested interest in the message being transmitted, thus making WOM such a powerful marketing medium. When people have no vested interest in the outcome of the communication, they are less likely to distort or exaggerate, i.e. they are more likely to tell the truth. In the age of information and marketing message overload, WOM is then more likely to cut through as communications that people trust. (Silverman 2005, 193-195.)

In addition to having an outstandingly differentiated product, constructing a successful WOM campaign requires approaching “leveraged influencers”, who will reach the maximum number of other people, in the most credible way. It is critical not to assume that leveraged influencers have the words with which to spread the word, but to supply them with sufficient materials and tools, which help reinforce their expertise. (Silverman 2015, 200-204.)

Indeed, influencers from different stakeholder groups seem to have taken a central role in HEIs’ marketing communications. A quick browse through Finnish HEIs social media channels reveals that many of them implement campaigns where alumni, partners and students share their favourable experience with the institution. However, this does not exclude the fact that campaigns are usually a win-win situation for the HEI and the influencer. At the minimum, the benefit of “giving one’s face” to a HEIs marketing could contribute to ECTS, professional recognition etc.

The most powerful messages, as argued previously, are likely to come from those who do not have vested interest in the outcome. However, integrated marketing communications and differentiation can help re-assure that the good word-of-mouth spreads in a desired way.

3.1.3 International marketing communications

International marketing communications must consider the different demographic, economic, geographic, cultural, technological, political and legal conditions in a foreign marketplace. Organizations operating globally face the major question of whether to localize (adapt) or globalize (standardize or integrate) its marketing communications across different cultures. Furthermore, shifting from the message strategy “what to say” into a creative

strategy that concerns “how to say it” is more problematic in international communications, when cultural differences can have a great impact on how the messages are perceived. Professionals working in marketing communications must be careful not to fall victim to the self-reference criterion (SRC), which refers to our unconscious tendency to refer everything to our own cultural values and think of them as superior to those of foreigners. (Pelsmacker et al. 2013, 10-11.)

There are several analytical approaches that help practitioners to better understand social and cultural dynamics in the global marketplace (Keegan 2014). For instance, Geert Hofstede’s groundbreaking model of “dimensions” of national culture and his other findings in intercultural research are used widely in both psychology and management studies. The dimensions of national culture, the “6-D model”, represent independent preferences for one situation over another that distinguish countries from each other. (Hofstede insights 2020.)

| | |
|------------------------------|---|
| Individualism | Individualism refers to the extent to which people feel independent, as opposed to being interdependent as members of larger wholes. |
| Power Distance | Power Distance is the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. |
| Masculinity | Masculinity is the extent to which the use of force is endorsed socially, i.e. referring to expected emotional gender roles. In a masculine society, men are supposed to be tough and winning is important for both genders. In a feminine society, the genders are emotionally closer, competing is not so openly endorsed and there is sympathy for the underdog. |
| Uncertainty Avoidance | Uncertainty avoidance deals with a society’s tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity. It has to do with anxiety and distrust in the face of the unknown, and conversely, with a wish to have fixed habits and rituals, and to know the truth. |
| Long-term orientation | Long-term orientation deals with change. In a long-time-oriented culture, the basic notion about the world is that it is in flux, and preparing for the future is always needed. In a short-time-oriented culture, the world is essentially as it was created, so that the past provides a moral compass, and adhering to it is morally good. |
| Indulgence | Indulgence is about the good things in life. In an indulgent culture it is good to be free and impulsive – life makes sense. In a restrained culture, the feeling is that life is hard, and duty, not freedom, is the normal state of being. |

Figure 9. The 6-D model of national culture. Adapted from Hofstede Insights (2020).

Although Hofstede is considered one of the pioneers in cultural research, his work has faced criticism for Western cultural bias, comprehensiveness of the dimensions and methodology (Keegan 2014). Nevertheless, for organizations seeking to start or increase international cooperation, Hofstede’s cultural dimensions may offer a useful tool to compare cultures and discover differences that help plan marketing communications. For instance,

on hofstedeinsights.com, one can select one or several countries to directly view the values for 6 dimensions. As an example, Finland and Spain were selected in the “country comparison” tool and the result is illustrated in figure 10.

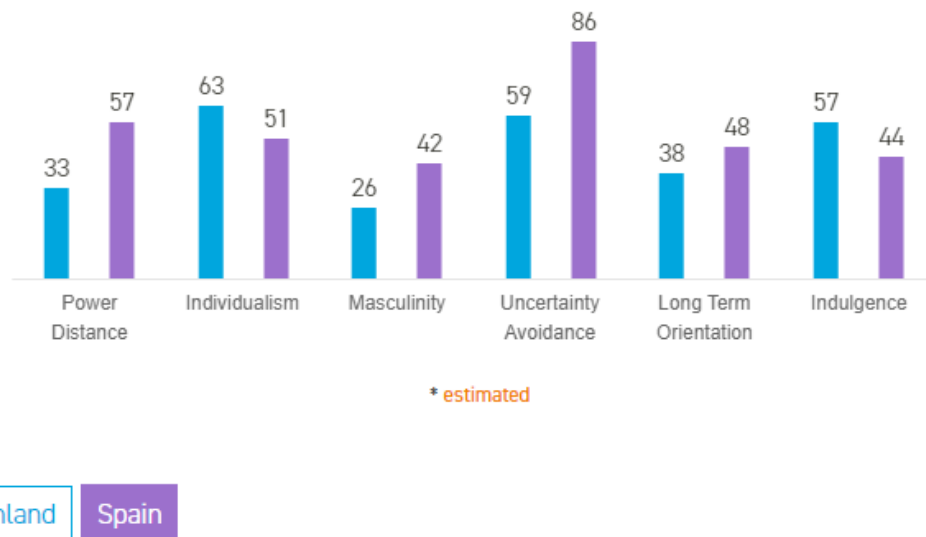


Figure 10. The six-dimension values for Finland and Spain in “country comparison” (Hofstede Insights 2020.)

The image suggests a fairly significant difference in the ‘uncertainty avoidance’ dimension between the two countries. Spain’s high score of 86 refers to a culture where the members feel threatened by unknown situations, and beliefs and institutions are created to avoid these situations. Changes and confrontation cause stress and there should be rules for everything, although at the same time, people avoid rules and laws that make life more complex. (Hofstede Insights 2020.) A high score in uncertainty avoidance could give indications to marketing communications but also to RDI project management, as to how bureaucracy is being perceived in different countries and found necessary for the success of the cooperation.

It is challenging to discuss international marketing in higher education without going into the topic of internationalization in higher education. Indeed, the internationalization of HEIs has been widely researched and several national and international university rankings include internationality as an important factor of a HEI’s reputation. Internationalization plan, however, is not equivalent to an international marketing scheme (Knight 2013). Maringe & Gibbs (2009) define internationalization “as the coming together of multiple institutional groups to influence the university to embed an international perspective in its traditional tripartite mission of teaching, research and service”.

To justify the need for international marketing communications in HEIs, one must first understand the reasons behind internationalization in HEIs. Maringe and Gibbs (2009) state that globalization is the most powerful driver of internationalization within HEIs. A raft of forces accelerating internationalization include:

- **The new knowledge society:** the importance of knowledge production, dissemination, and application in a rapidly changing world requires new forms of higher education embedding a global outlook.
- **The ICT revolution:** knowledge transfer and application has become more speedy, reliable and efficient. New forms of teaching, learning and research can enhance HEIs' capacity to adopt global perspectives.
- **A growing utilitarianism in higher education:** The intrinsic value of learning is becoming subordinate to the tangible benefits associated with higher education. Consequently, HEIs are incorporating a strong business orientation, work-based learning approaches, international work and study experience as strategies to increase their attractiveness among applicants and to prepare their graduates for work in the international context.
- **Growing demand for higher education:** a lack of capacity in many developing countries is fueling academic migration to the more developed world, creating a market for overseas institutions to recruit internationally.
- **Political and economic instability:** political and economic instability can create push factors for deciding to study abroad. Thus, adoption of an international dimension becomes a necessary part of many HEIs' strategies.
- **Decreasing public funding of higher education:** international students tend to pay significantly higher fees than home students. As a response to this investment, many HEIs have specific international students' affairs offices and budgets aimed at enriching international students' higher education experience.

HEIs communicate about their internationalization activities in various ways, but among the most prominent forms are marketing internationalization through the HEI's mission, brand marketing and setting up offices and campuses overseas. (Maringe & Gibbs 2009, 85-99.) At TUAS, international cooperation is mentioned in the strategy as a means of bringing further expertise to the region, thus fulfilling the "primary task to produce competent professionals for the development and needs of working life in Southwest Finland" (Turku University of Applied Sciences 2020a). Although cooperation with international networks is emphasized in the strategy, internationalization activities don't play an essential role in TUAS' brand marketing and there are currently no plans to set up offices or campuses overseas.

As the forces accelerating internationalization in HEIs are multi-dimensional, HEIs too, should take a holistic approach to developing and managing internationalization effectively across the institution. In the 2nd edition of EAIE Barometer: Internationalisation in Europe

(2018), European HEIs' internationalization goals were uncovered. Institutional reputation / competitiveness was cited as the third most important goal for internationalization (53 %) when improving the quality of research came in fourth (38 %). Interestingly, in the first edition of the barometer in 2014, reputation / competitiveness was not cited in the top three goals for internationalization.

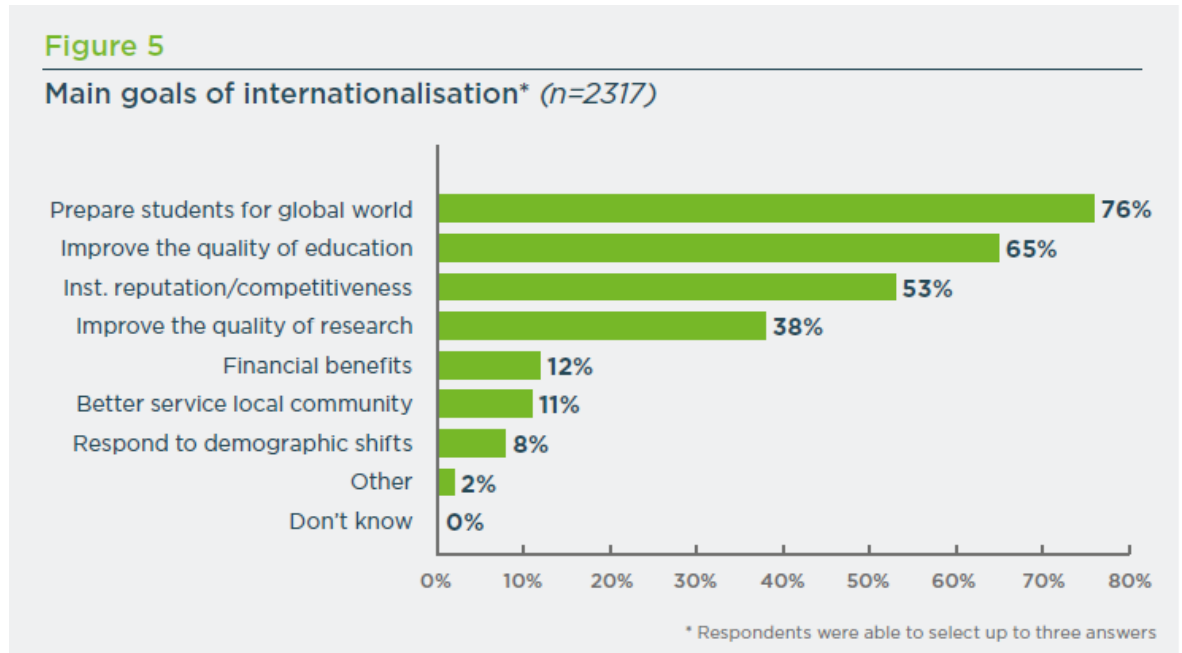


Figure 11. HEIs' goals for internationalization (Sandström & Hudson 2018)

Knight and De Wit (2018) discuss the evolution of the term *internationalization* in higher education during the past five decades. They conclude that if the emphasis once was on academic mobility, cooperation and mutual benefits, today new developments such as branding, internationalization at home, MOOCs, global rankings and world-class universities are all commonly used terms under the widely preferred umbrella term of "international education". Competition, commercialization, self-interest and status building increasingly characterize internationalization. They argue that more attention should be put to the internationalization of graduate education and research. Research has become more international, complex and competitive, requiring the development of international or global research teams. (Knight and de Wit 2018.)

In terms of Knight and De Wit's (2018) argument, the RDI Services unit at TUAS is on a good track, as it is the only organizational unit at TUAS using English as the unit's internal working language. This can be seen to add to the minority of non-Finnish speaking employees' sense of inclusion, but on a broader level, it can also bring value to the interna-

tional RDI cooperation in practice. Moreover, the RDI personnel's expertise in international cooperation could be utilized to plan international marketing communications on a strategic level. Their experience of different target countries' culture and habits, as well as the focus points and competitive landscape on RDI is a valuable asset regarding international strategy work.

3.2 The higher education aspect

In order to stay relevant in the increasing global competition, HEIs need to pay attention to marketing and branding. Branding in the context of higher education has not been studied widely, but research on marketing and branding has been around for many years and provides valuable information for HEIs to consider. It's important to remember that marketing higher education includes all the actions of a HEI. While a majority of a HEI's marketing activities may seem to aim for student recruitment, an institution continuously sends signals about its current issues and future plans through alumni, staff members and research projects. (Papadimitriou & Ramirez 2017, 240; Bourke 2000.)

Indeed, HEIs should carefully identify the various channels and stakeholders that spread messages of its activities and ensure that the messages are consistent. In a report on the structural development of RDI activities at Universities of Applied Sciences (Arene ry 2017), SAMOK's Education Policy Advisor Anni Vesa highlights the importance of student buy-in and word-of-mouth:

“When students understand what RDI is, they can also convey the message into their working life wherever they go. This would strengthen the potential for the recognition of work as learning competence and the thought that, at Universities of Applied Sciences in particular, work and study are not two separate things, but have a strong connection to each other.”

Hence, by increasing the visibility of an HEI's RDI activities among internal stakeholders, e.g. students, it is possible to build a reputation and create new, valuable partnerships.

Maringe & Gibbs (2009, 42) argue that marketing education through consumerism is inappropriate for education's intrinsic worth. Nevertheless, they note that HEIs whose mission it is to develop intrinsic as well as extrinsic value and enrich the society, will stand out and gain competitive advantage. Marketization of higher education should be viewed critically in order to identify abuses and perils.

In the 2005 issue of The International journal of Educational Management, Felix Maringe argued that HE marketing is still in its infancy and facing a three-pronged crisis:

1. internal resistance to marketization
2. the failure of HE to identify itself with a specific product
3. the failure of HE to domesticate the marketing idea.

To help with the issues related to higher education marketing, Maringe (2005, 573) developed the curriculum focused CORD model, standing for Contextualization, Organization and co-ordination, Research and Development. Illustrated in figure 12, The CORD model provides a framework for HEIs to develop a home-grown educational marketing philosophy which emphasizes a strategic focus.



Figure 12. The CORD Model of Marketing Strategy. Adapted from Maringe 2005.

Contextualization requires HEIs to gain a deeper understanding of the internal and external environments in which they intend to develop their curriculum. *Organization and coordination* ensure that the HEI's marketing function becomes a grassroots process involving interdisciplinary working and cross fertilization of ideas. *Researching the customer interface* allows HEIs to employ a variety of marketing techniques to develop curriculum and thus achieve customer satisfaction. The *development* phase includes a well-rehearsed cycle of curriculum development with trials and evaluation as integral features of the development process. The model suggests that for HEIs to adopt a strategic marketing orientation, the processes of research and teaching cannot be separated as they both contribute to the HEI's "core business", curriculum development. (Maringe 2005, 574-576.)

According to Papadimitrou & Ramirez (2017), HEIs need to communicate their values to the public to remain as relevant social institutions. Thus, it is important for HEIs to pay attention to marketing and branding. They name three particularly critical issues related to higher education marketing: a) brand equity, b) the role played by exclusivity and c) the risk of counterfeiting. First, brand equity can constitute a risk in higher education, because it can be completely disconnected from the activities of the HEI. In other words, a HEI with very high brand equity may not live up to its reputation. Second, the idea of differentiation operates well in the context of private goods, but as higher education retains elements of public good, exclusivity, or elitism, is not necessarily a positive attribute. HE practitioners need to determine boundaries that limit the influence of marketing and branding on their activities. The third issue is related to the authenticity of HE brands. The risk of utilizing denotative brand elements of institutions with a good reputation is prominent especially in contexts where copyright enforcement is lax. (Papadimitrou & Ramirez 2017, 245-246.)

The increasing competition in higher education puts pressure particularly to new universities, which face the challenge of becoming excellent but also differentiating themselves at the same time. Hence, having the best possible understanding of the market that a HEI wishes to serve can help in strategic positioning, which again can lead to competitive advantage. HEIs can benefit from segmentation processes, which deliver understanding of the intended markets. Investing time and resources in understanding different stakeholders' needs is the starting point for staying relevant in the competitive higher education marketplace. (Gibbs et al. 2008, 80-81.)

TUAS has not been particularly proactive in understanding the needs of international RDI partners and collaborators. This is probably due to the fact that the volume of international RDI collaboration has gone up only in the recent years, and the significance of it to TUAS'

funding hasn't yet been internalized on an organizational level. Moreover, the responsibilities regarding stakeholder management have been unclear. However, in spring 2020 the RDI Services unit began a development project to improve stakeholder management at TUAS. This could put pressure to the planning of marketing communications to international stakeholders as well.

4 Research approach

In this chapter I will describe the empirical part of the research and introduce and justify the used research methods. The research was conducted as a case study and the main data was collected by semi-structured theme interviews to answer the research question “*What is the image and reputation of TUAS among international RDI partners?*”. The research had three sub questions:

- a. Which elements are TUAS' image and reputation built / based on?*
- b. How does TUAS differentiate from its competitors?*
- c. What should be emphasized in TUAS' international marketing communications to foster image and reputation?*

The research questions and existing body of knowledge helped in designing the research approach and the interview frame. Combining the theoretical knowledge and interview results, the outcome of this thesis is a list of recommendations to consider in TUAS's international marketing communications.

4.1 Qualitative research method

Principally, research methods are divided into qualitative or quantitative methods. A qualitative method seeks in-depth understanding of a certain phenomenon by usually looking at a small sample, as opposed to quantitative method which is about larger samples. Qualitative research methods include, e.g., focus groups or extended interviews to obtain insights that might be difficult to reach in a large, structured survey. The small sample sizes in qualitative research usually make it hard for researchers to state the accuracy of their results, but often the answers are such, that statistical bounds don't apply. The moderators hold a high level of dependency in qualitative research, as they are responsible for most of the interviewing, building the knowledge capital and adjusting the questions along the research progress. (Hague et al. 2016, 45-46.)

Qualitative research aims to understand, whereas quantitative research aims to generalize. In qualitative research, one cannot ask very precise questions, since the phenomenon investigated is yet unknown. Thus, the researcher can use, for instance, the theme interview method and discuss the research topic with related themes. In quantitative research theory backs the investigated phenomenon and thus allows very detailed questions related to the variables of the phenomenon. (Kananen 2013, 26.)

The qualitative research method is justified for this research, since the aim is to build understanding on a subject for the first time (Hague et al. 2016, 47). That is, to explore international RDI stakeholders' perspectives of TUAS' image and reputation.

4.1.1 Adaption of case study method

In this research, the case study method was used. Case study is a common research method in, e.g., business, education and community planning. It's often a relevant research method when the questions (e.g. "how" or "why") seek to explain or describe a present circumstance or a social phenomenon. The case study method allows a researcher to retain a holistic and meaningful description of real-life events, such as group behavior, organizational processes and international relations (Yin 2009, 4).

A case study shouldn't hold prior theoretical notions, because before getting a hold of the data and understanding the context, one cannot know which theories work best. Three underlying principles characterize a case study: creating a case study database, using multiple sources of evidence, and maintaining a chain of evidence, i.e. each key element relates to evidence of different kinds. While qualitative research methods are primary for a case study research, it is not exclusively concerned with qualitative methods, such as observation and interviews. Triangulation, a common strategy in case study research, is a means of cross-checking the relevance of issues related to the research and exploring different perspectives (Gillham 2000, 2, 10, 20; Simons 2009, 129).

Case study method is a suitable research approach for development projects, where the aim is to produce recommendations and ideas based on the increased understanding of a certain phenomenon. Case studies typically begin with examining the case itself, rather than familiarizing with related theories. Often the researcher has prior knowledge of the studied phenomenon, which makes it easier to define the preliminary research problem and scope. Furthermore, one should be familiar with the case before being able to search for relevant data and set detailed research questions. Figure 4 illustrates the process of a case study. (Ojasalo et al. 2015, 53-54.)

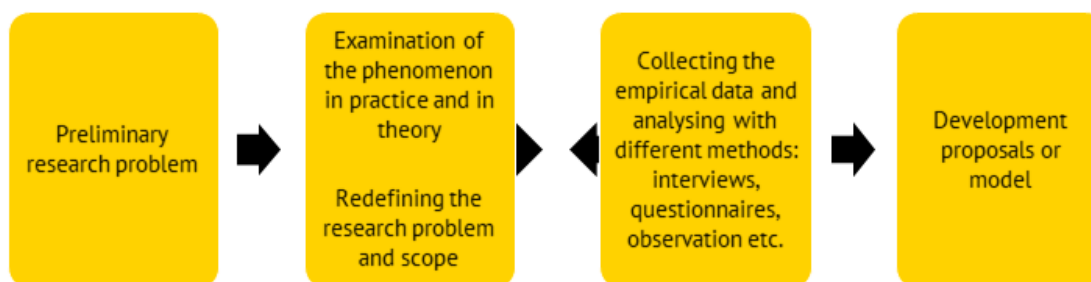


Figure 13. A case study process (Adapted from Ojasalo et al. 2015, 54)

In this research, the aim is to understand *how* international RDI partners find TUAS' image and reputation and *why*. The focus is on creating a deeper understanding of the current situation, and as a result, introduce suggestions for improvement. The main principles of case study research are followed by creating a case study database, using multiple sources for evidence such as documentation and interviews and maintaining the chain of evidence. The researcher's work background in the case organization made it easier to define the research problem. In addition, discussions with key representatives at TUAS helped in narrowing the scope and objectives of the research. The research followed the typical case study process as illustrated in figure 13. Thus, case study was found a suitable research method for this study.

4.1.2 Theme interviews

Theme interviews are one of the most used methods for data collection in case study research. The aim of theme interviews is to expand the researcher's understanding of a certain phenomenon, and therefore should not be mechanically executed with entirely set themes and questions. In a normal, face-to-face theme interview, new topics and questions should always arise during the conversation between the interviewer and the interviewee. The interview themes should be selected carefully to cover different aspects of the phenomenon. This requires some view of the phenomena, and thus related theory should be investigated before. A theme interview should proceed from general to detail, continuously deepening the interviewer's understanding of the phenomena. (Kananen 2013, 93-96.)

During a theme interview, the interviewer should be able to adapt and reflect the interviewee's answers, even if it means stepping into conversation areas or themes that weren't previously thought of. This may require several rounds of interviews, as new insights emerge during the interview and in the analysis phase. A theme interview should mainly consist of open questions, such as *why*, *what*, *how*, and allow the interviewee to openly reflect his / her answers. It is important to avoid closed and leading questions, which may affect the reliability of the research. (Kananen 2013, 96-98.)

In qualitative research, the number of interviewees cannot often be determined in advance. I.e., the research problem and data collected define the appropriate amount of people to be interviewed. The amount of interviews can be regarded as sufficient, once the replies start to repeat themselves and the results saturate. Achieving the saturation in qualitative research requires continuous interaction between the data collection and analysis stages. (Kananen 2013, 95.)

4.2 Implementation of the research

The data for the empirical part of this thesis was collected by semi-structured theme interviews. The themes of the interviews were based on relevant theory discussed in chapters 2 and 3. In addition, documentation such as internal documents, websites and email enquiries were used for framing the research questions.

After examining the concept of image, reputation and marketing communications in the higher education context, the interview frame was built around following themes:

- Image and reputation in higher education
- Image and reputation of TUAS
- Marketing communications
- Competitive advantage
- Partnerships and cooperation

As Kananen (2013) suggests, a theme interview should proceed from general to detail; therefore, the themes were first discussed in the context of higher education in general and continuing to discuss the case of TUAS. The researcher believes this added depth to the interviewees' answers, as they were able to approach the topic through a broader context.

The interviewees were selected based on the suggestions of TUAS staff members who had experience working in international RDI projects. The aim was to find interviewees from partner organizations that had a critical role in an international RDI project and had

experience of working with TUAS in one or more projects. Typically, an international RDI project involves several people from different partner organizations at different stages of the project. To secure the quality of the interviews, it was important to find interviewees who had a key role throughout the project cycle and had been communicating with TUAS frequently. This would ensure more reliable and comprehensive evaluations of TUAS' image and reputation.

The recommended interviewees were contacted and briefed about the research via email. Finally, nine RDI partners from different countries accepted the interview invitation and all the interviews were conducted within a two months period. Because of the geographical distance, the interviews were conducted via Zoom video conference tool, which allowed a "nearly" face-to-face interview. One interview session had quite a lot of technical problems and thus had to be done in two parts. Other than that, the interviews proceeded technically well and made the physical distance seem almost irrelevant, at least from the researcher's point of view. Of course, the situation might have been different in a group interview, but a one-on-one interview was fairly easy to facilitate.

To ensure an ethical approach and the anonymity of the interviewees (Ojasalo et al. 2015), the interviews were coded. In table 1 the coding is presented together with the amount of experience that the interviewees had with TUAS and the dates and lengths of the interviews. The countries were excluded from the table to ensure anonymity, but the interviewees were from HEIs located in France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, South Africa and Spain.

Table 1. Interview coding.

| Code | Experience with TUAS | Date of the interview | Length of the interview |
|-------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| A | > 5 years | February 2, 2020 | 36 min |
| B | > 2 years | February 12, 2020 | 43 min |
| C | > 5 years | February 18, 2020 | 60 min |
| D | > 5 years | February 27, 2020 | 46 min |
| E | > 5 years | March 5, 2020 | 55 min |
| F | > 5 years | February 21, 2020 | 50 min |
| G | > 5 years | February 24, 2020 | 34 min |
| H | > 2 years | March 2, 2020 | 55 min |
| I | > 5 years | March 9 and April 7 2020 | 53 min |

Simons (2009,47) highlights the importance of active listening and open questioning in interviews. The interviewer should know when to listen and when to question; it's not good to intervene before the interviewee has gotten to the heart of his / her story, but on the other hand, the interviewee shouldn't dominate the interviewee entirely either and take the interviewer off track from gaining relevant data. In some cases, where little tolerance for unstructured questions may occur, sending a short list of questions to the interviewees in advance can be helpful. (Simons 2009, 47-48.)

As none of the interviewees were specialists in the research topic, I sent potential interview questions to them in advance. This allowed for the interviewees to prepare for the themes discussed, and main concepts needn't be explained deeply in the beginning of the interviews, which were mainly conducted during the interviewees' workday.

Notes were taken during the interviews to provide a starting point for early analysis (Simons 2009, 53). The interviews were recorded and transcript into written format to maintain a chain of evidence and help the analysis (Gillham 2000, 20). During and between the interviews, analysis was made to draw patterns and categorize the interview results. Listening the interview recordings several times and transcribing the data word-by-word made the researcher familiar with the collected data and better prepared for the subsequent interview.

5 Research results

This chapter reports the results of the theme interviews. Direct quotations from the coded interviews are included to support the reliability of the research. The nature of the interviews was semi-structured, but the organization of the findings presented here follows the intended interview structure. Thus, some answers are repeated under several themes. The themes and potential interview questions were sent to the interviewees in advance. This interview frame is presented in appendix 1.

5.1 The premises of image and reputation in higher education

When discussing the qualities that matter to an HEI's image and reputation, the interviewees emphasized the quality of education and research. Academic excellence was seen as a key factor in determining an HEI's image and reputation, but in addition the ability to collaborate and manage projects was found very important. The interviewees found that engaging with partners and networks is crucial, i.e. HEIs cannot function "alone" and good collaboration skills are essential for an HEIs image and reputation. The interviewees mentioned several qualities that are generally associated with "good cooperation":

- international connectiveness (A, C, D, H),
- innovativeness (B, C),
- community engagement (B),
- communication skills (D),
- societal impact (F),
- relations with the industry (G),
- investments in young scholars (H),
- trustworthiness (H),
- high quality technological facilities and
- prepared personnel (I).

"Quality" was a word emphasized by all interviewees when discussing HEIs' image and reputation. The quality of research outcomes was regarded more important than, e.g., the volume of projects or publications. One interviewee mentioned that the pressure of "high volumes" is already affecting the quality of research:

"We are living in this super quantitative world, so everything has a number...our score, average, impact factor. I think, in a way it's affecting the quality that we are doing, because we are so stressed about these high level activities, that sometimes we just miss the point – that it's ok to have less but the more quality, higher standards. Especially the younger generation is pushed to be more performative, to publish a lot, attend conferences, teach and so on... besides the research, there is too much other work to do." (H)

The interviewees found that generally international RDI collaboration affects positively on a HEI's reputation, as it's a way of creating synergies and ensuring that an institution is up to date in its research and development work.

“Reputation always comes from outside, how others evaluate you. Most of the developments in the 21st century are happening through projects, so in this shared knowledge and resources are crucial. If you exclude yourself from these, you can do a very good desktop research in your home university, but you will be isolated. So, I think it's (international RDI collaboration) crucial.” (C)

“I have been working with TUAS in two projects, both have been very successful, and in both of them, we were invited because our university also has a very good quality and reputation. We trust TUAS a lot.” (I)

All interviewees had a relatively critical personal stance towards HEI rankings, and they did not admit to following any rankings closely. Previous experience with institutions and personal networks were found more important regarding RDI collaboration. However, it was noted that HEIs are principally interested in constantly improving their numbers and reputation, and rankings provide one way for the public to compare HEIs. Hence, on an organizational level, rankings could affect the initiatives in RDI collaboration.

“Honestly, I think these rankings are quite biased, but they might have good intentions. As soon as the methodology of the ranking is clear, the universities try to exploit this knowledge and reach higher. Of course, it is very important for all the universities to show that they have a high reputation in rankings. I think this might sometimes distort the rankings. For example, in Russia many universities are now merging to become bigger and do better in these rankings.” (C)

Rankings can give some indication of the level of research that HEIs are operating on, but when it comes to initiating new RDI collaboration, word-of-mouth and personal experience with a reliable partner were regarded as key factors in the decision-making process for new RDI partnerships:

“Usually when a proposal comes from another university, usually it's on the same or even higher level in the ranking, so they don't look at our ranking positions. Not sure that they [HEI rankings] play a crucial role.” (D)

The interviewees didn't find HEI rankings very trustworthy in terms of evaluating the image and reputation of RDI partners – the HEI's ability to cooperate and make impact was considered much more relevant. New RDI cooperation is often initiated based on personal relations or recommendations from colleagues. A few interviewees mentioned their institutions are more concerned with national rankings, as they are seen to affect the potential students' decision-making process (E, F). International rankings were criticized for being too research-oriented and not measuring the relevant factors:

“I think the rankings are too much oriented on academic output, such as publications. They are not directed on the impact and I think that impact for UASs is much more important than the academic output. We are not very much interested in these rankings, we try to do our job in research and education as well as possible and have good cooperation with the professional field, I think that's much more important.” (G)

5.2 Image and reputation of TUAS

After discussing HEIs image and reputation on a general level, the interviewees were asked how they find TUAS' reputation as an HEI. Several interviewees highlighted that their comments were based only on their personal work experience in RDI projects with TUAS. The answers emphasized the collaboration with TUAS and how well it was running from the interviewees' perspective, instead of speculating on the reputation, i.e. how the general public feels about an organization.

“I find that TUAS is a well reputed institution, and of course in the scientific world it's highly valued. I don't know to which extent TUAS is visible in rankings, but I can tell the general image is good, there is a high level of trust.” (I)

Despite being rather cautious with their answers, all interviewees concluded that TUAS' reputation is good and strong, and this was mainly related to the ability to manage projects and cooperate fluently: TUAS is seen as a pleasant partner to work with. The geographical location of TUAS was also seen as a contributing factor for reputation (A, C, D.).

“In general, Finnish educational system has a good reputation so I think it's a good point for you, even if you are not in the top 100 in the rankings. I believe TUAS is quite a strong university, but I cannot compare. Maybe XAMK has more applied research...My impression is that TUAS is very strong in project management, and lots of innovative stuff is coming from TUAS.” (C)

The answers concerning TUAS' image repeated the same narrative, emphasizing TUAS staff members' great collaboration and project management skills, which contributed significantly to a positive image of TUAS. Other mentioned strengths in TUAS's image were innovativeness (A, C, F), strong relations to practice (F), communication (B, D) and professional working style (B, I, F). TUAS was also described as very organized (B), tech-savvy (C), consensus-oriented (C, G), reliable (H) and human-sized (I).

"...you are sensitive to elements, such as environmental issues, human rights issues etc. For us it's essential. In fact, it's one of my pillars – when I work with an institution, I want to be aware that they have human rights and gender perspective, and that they are very professional and are accurate in their results. Because we are accurate in our results and we work professionally as an institution, so we want to work with people who are doing the same as us. So, in many ways, TUAS is our ideal partner." (I)

The different cultural backgrounds of the interviewees did not seem to affect the interviewees' opinions on what is regarded as a strength in TUAS' image. The answers emphasized reliability, timeliness, organization and problem-solving skills as contributors to a positive image. One interviewee mentioned that partners in general find gender roles very equal in TUAS projects led by TUAS, whereas teams including Southern European countries the male sometimes has more weight in the discussion. TUAS was described as partner that relies on shared leadership in projects and makes everyone feel included.

When discussing more specifically about the factors that influenced the interviewees' image of TUAS, professional style of working, project management and problem-solving skills were seen as the key factors. Turku's reputation as a vibrant and academic community as well as the innovation pedagogy promoted by TUAS were seen as factors that contribute to an image of a place *"where exciting things happen"* (A). In addition, the interviewees found that the following factors had contributed to their positive image of TUAS:

- TUAS website (B),
- project related marketing (B),
- technological orientation (C),
- invitations to international events (E),
- project administration and supporting staff (E, F),
- online communication (H)
- good word from colleagues (G).

Many interviewees struggled to find weaknesses in TUAS' image, but a few mentioned that TUAS' technocratic and consensus-oriented leadership style could, in some situations, be considered a weakness (C, H). However, this was regarded partly as a cultural

difference, one that could in some cases work for TUAS' benefit. It was also noted that being bolder in face-to-face communication could add to the credibility of TUAS (H). TUAS employees were complimented for having very good skills in English, but project reviewers seem to take native English speakers more seriously and language question could thus be a weakness (G).

One interviewee mentioned that TUAS' aims in international projects are very high and lowering expectations could help in finding common ground to work on with partners, that have less experience in international RDI projects (D). Another referred to TUAS' pedagogy and found that in some cases TUAS' students lacked project planning skills, because they were given too much freedom to do things their own way (F). The lack of continuity for RDI collaboration, after a project has finished, was also seen as a weakness:

"I think that one weakness, maybe more from TUAS rather than others because TUAS was the leader (in the project), was that they were unable to keep members of the project linked to the project...The project can be worthy, even if has been funded or not...I think it tasapainoinen would be nice if the partners could be able to re-evaluate the project a year after it has finished, to see how we have kept on going with the results, and even if we are able to give it continuity with another funding source." (I)

The comments regarding weaknesses in TUAS' image were more related to working habits and cultural differences rather than the actual image. However, one could conclude that these challenges can, if not dealt with appropriate measures, eventually affect the overall image of TUAS negatively. Shared leadership, consensus-orientation and a balanced way of managing projects were seen as strengths in TUAS' image, but on the other hand, showing more strong, charismatic leadership was called for, especially in conflict situations. This heightens the question of international marketing communications and the need to familiarize with the target countries' culture. Naturally, different individuals appreciate different kind of leadership styles, but in TUAS' case some sort of golden mean could be considered to be found as none of the interviewees evaluated TUAS's leadership exceptionally weak.

The question *"How could TUAS improve its international image and reputation"* was found rather difficult by many interviewees, as TUAS' international image and reputation was principally considered very good, based on the interviewees' personal experiences. One interviewee (E) even said *"TUAS is the most international oriented partner I have"*. It was

noted that in order to improve its international image and reputation, TUAS could emphasize more its role as a project leader and not be too modest when communicating RDI related achievements (A, C, D, H).

“There are very few HEIs that are able to think about taking the leadership of projects. Because for this you need very strong English skills in the whole administration of the project. I believe that smaller countries with good language skills and HE systems are in a very good position to take leadership in international projects. I think TUAS now has intentions in doing this...It’s a good momentum to do this.” (C)

One interviewee mentioned that TUAS could promote its activities on a broader level: *“...not on the first level that one might think – like the UK, Germany or Scandinavian countries – but for instance in the south. That would be useful [for improving the international image and reputation]”* (D). Another emphasized the importance of keeping the RDI networks alive, i.e. continuing relations with reliable project partners after a project has ended and raising awareness of the project topics to enable future collaboration (I).

In addition, dissemination of good practices (G), emphasizing the amount of international networks (A, H), cooperation with the industry (A) and utilizing technology to engage more people (B), were seen as ways that TUAS could improve its international image and reputation. Emphasizing on the scientific work was also seen important:

“TUAS has had to carry a lot of administrative tasks in our project, so they remained less on the scientific side. So maybe this gave the impression that TUAS is more a coordinator, rather than a scientific partner. I would love to have a meeting there to connect with TUAS more” (H).

To sum, the interviewees found that TUAS could communicate more about its activities in different platforms and engage stakeholders on a broader level. Many were familiar with individual RDI projects, employees and their professional background, but the interviewees lacked an overall image of TUAS’ activities as an HEI. In relation to TUAS’ work and results, the communication style was regarded as very modest, whereas a more bold approach to communicating achievements could improve the international image and reputation.

5.3 Developing image and reputation through marketing communications

Marketing communications in higher education was a theme that didn't evoke very strong opinions from any of the interviewees. When asked about the most important marketing communications channels for HEIs, nearly all interviewees mentioned it depends what HEIs want to communicate and to whom. However, HEIs' strong online presence was emphasized by all. According to the interviewees, the most important marketing communications channels for HEIs are the website (A, B, E, H, I), social media (B, E, F, G, H, I) and international events / conferences (A, C, D, F). Blogs were also mentioned as an important channel for research groups (I).

The interviewees found that informal networks and word-of-mouth affect strongly on a HEI's image and reputation. Moreover, friends' and colleagues' recommendations were found particularly important regarding new RDI initiatives and networks:

“The things I've heard about TUAS from other colleagues is very positive. If I didn't know you and I would be looking for a partner for European project, the information I got from you would be very positive and would stimulate to work together.” (G)

“If I hear from a trustworthy person, that this is a good institution, with good collaboration and good experience in the research team, I would trust this opinion. I think this works also for other colleagues. I remember hearing from my colleagues about TUAS and that was important.” (D)

While word-of-mouth was mainly discussed as a phenomenon that adds to a positive image and reputation, it was noted that bad experiences spread equally fast through word-of-mouth and can affect the image and reputation negatively (E). Strategic alliances such as the CARPE network², which TUAS is also a member of, were also mentioned as possible positive factors (C, G) contributing to a HEIs image and reputation. Assuming that the network is successful, word-of-mouth might weight less when considering new RDI initiatives with a member of the network.

² CARPE, the Consortium on Applied Research and Professional Education, is a strategic alliance of a number of European universities of Applied sciences. The partners aim to encourage cooperation in European research programmes and jointly develop educational programmes. CARPE was launched in 2011 by Hamburg University of Applied Sciences, HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht, Turku University of Applied Sciences and Universitat Polytècnica de València. The University of Debrecen joined in 2017 as a full member. From 2012 until 2018 Manchester Metropolitan University participated in CARPE. (CARPE 2020)

Many interviewees couldn't comment on how TUAS' marketing communications had affected their image of TUAS, since personal relations and previous experience contributed so strongly to their image. The interviewees were unaware of the organizational level marketing communications efforts and thus found it hard to evaluate. However, three interviewees mentioned TUAS' website was informative and up to date and this affected the image positively (A, E, F). One interviewee said receiving a hard-copy publication from TUAS was valuable and affected the image positively (F), and two interviewees mentioned invitations to TUAS' international events can affect the image positively (E, C), as it demonstrates that TUAS is active and has interest in others (E).

Presence in social media was found important for TUAS' image by all interviewees, and many highlighted TUAS staff members' good implementation of project communication in social media. One interviewee mentioned he uses social media to keep in contact with TUAS staff members, but that there is too little time to systematically follow other networks in social media (I). The interviewees admitted to following, if any, TUAS colleagues' personal profiles instead of the TUAS organizational pages, because communication from personal connections was found more trustworthy and relevant.

"I would prefer the personal social media messages. Because it also tells a little bit more about the person behind. And when you are going to work together it's much more about the people you work with, than it is about the organization." (G.)

TUAS' presence in social media was mainly viewed through the individual TUAS employees' presence and activities. Twitter (A, C, D, F, H, I), LinkedIn (E, F, G, I), Facebook (C, G, H) and Research Gate (B) were mentioned as important social media channels in the RDI context, but also Youtube (C) was mentioned. Instagram was considered an effective channel to reach the younger target groups (I, H).

"I think Twitter communication is very immediate and widely used - you can share images as well as words, make connections, share project reports and publications and such." (A)

"I use LinkedIn quite a lot and I regularly see interesting results from some person or institution, and I find it very useful, but that's my personal opinion. On the other hand, as an HEI you must communicate to the world what you are doing and show that you exist, and I think that (social media) is an easy way to communicate. Of course, it should be meaningful what you disseminate - not just some bullshit." (F)

The interviewees highlighted the importance of using relevant marketing communications channels for different target groups. Social media was seen as a good way to reach colleagues within the HE field and communicate the HEI activities, especially through employees' personal accounts:

"I think it's important to contribute to conferences and write articles but also showing that you are not only writing academic articles for the academic output, but also showing your interest in the impact of your activities. And that you are active in reaching impact. That would be important for me when looking for a new project partner. Showing that you're interested in reaching the professionals in the fields." (G)

In addition to RDI partners, many of the interviewees mentioned they work also with other stakeholders, such as outgoing exchange students of their institution. This magnifies the relevance of word-of-mouth, as partners are likely to receive messages related to TUAS from several different stakeholders – not only the ones working in RDI. Moreover, RDI employees that hold a holistic view of TUAS' activities and services, and know how to market them, are in key positions to leverage TUAS' international image and reputation and bring back various forms of cooperation.

5.4 Competitive advantage

The interviewees' views on how HEIs can gain competitive advantage echoed the discussion concerning HEIs' image and reputation. Nearly all interviewees mentioned high quality research outcomes and international networks as important assets for HEIs in gaining competitive advantage (A, B, C, D, E, G, I).

"Finally, the question is how many students are coming to the university. If they can proof they have relations to the labor market, it can be a positive point. Also, universities should support those researchers who are doing high quality research. Sometimes researchers just publish because they have to – but in reality, they have no impact. Those universities that can distinguish between real research and the those that have very little impact, I think that's important." (C)

"If you don't strive to get more involvement from international projects, I think you will struggle to be competitive among other RDI institutions. For me it's about research, master's and doctoral degrees output, their quality and integrity and the academic offering. I think that can increase the competitiveness amongst other institutions." (B)

International courses and tuition fees were seen to add to HEIs' competitive advantage as international students tend to bring a lot of money to HEIs (F, C, I). Two interviewees also mentioned resources and the ability to attract project funding with support mechanisms, such as RDI services at TUAS and money from ministry, to develop project proposals (C, F). Good relations with industry were mentioned by two interviewees (A, C). Political connections (C), location (F), inclusion in terms of gender and ethnicity (H) and innovativeness (E, H) were also mentioned as assets that can help HEIs' gain competitive advantage. Marketing activities didn't come up directly, but a few interviewees emphasized the importance of HEIs showing their results and research outcomes to the world as way of gaining competitive advantage (B, G, F, E, H).

The interviewees found that TUAS' competitors are mainly other HEIs in Finland and Europe. One interviewee (A) specified that the main competitors could be institutions *"in big cities but not capital cities"*. Some interviewees saw that TUAS is mainly competing with other Universities of Applied Sciences (A, D, E), but some found that traditional universities and UASs are increasingly competing with each other (D, F, G, I).

"UASs are competing more and more with traditional universities, this has to do with the fact that UASs have become more research-oriented and on the other hand traditional universities have to do more applied research." (F)

"I think the number of [RDI project] proposals that UASs are participating in is increasing, it has shown that we have to bring specific knowledge and experiences within these projects, which is important for the success of the project, but also for the European agenda. We put different things in, than the academic competitors, and I think especially in the impact, we can do better than them." (G)

One interviewee specifically highlighted TUAS's distinguishing role as an RDI oriented University of Applied Sciences:

"TUAS has a high degree of success in applying for international funding, so in that sense it's behaving like a traditional university, even much better. I think it competes mainly in the field of research with traditional universities, but also there are good UASs that have a good degree of research, such as Utrecht UAS, Inholland UAS, I think they are very good...Of course not many UASs are not really investing in research, and I think this is a very good point for TUAS, because it really opened Pandora's box in this field, and I think it's really good." (I)

When discussing competitive advantage, the interviewees were asked how does TUAS differentiate from its competitors. All interviewees listed one or more attributes. TUAS' openness to innovation was mentioned several times during the interviews and this was also seen as differentiating factor by three interviewees (C, D, F).

"I think TUAS differentiates in that it is quite well organized, has a clear direction. Also, it is very open to innovative and applied stuff. You look like a professional HEI, your rector is a brilliant speaker and person and I'm sure he's a very high-level academic researcher. You are a traditional university but also very innovative, so I think it's a good mixture." (C)

Other differentiating attributes related to TUAS were close connections with industry (A), pedagogical approach (A, F), know-how in project management (B, C) collaboration and problem-solving skills (D), and Finnish background (G, H). One interviewee found that TUAS has a unique combination of warmth and professionalism: the staff is very nice and welcoming (I). Another referred to an on-going Horizon 2020 project and found that, despite being such a young HEI, it is a big achievement to lead such a project and TUAS should emphasize this in its communications to differentiate from other HEIs (H).

Generally, TUAS' professional way of work and managing of RDI projects were found as strengths that make TUAS stand out as an HEI. One interviewee emphasized the value that the RDI services unit brings to TUAS and considered it a differentiating asset:

"One huge difference I see, regarding the RDI work, is your European projects department [RDI services]: managing the project, writing the proposal, setting up the documents, having the professional knowledge on how to do that. This is a really big advantage and differentiating point of TUAS. They do administrative part but also the writing, project management and communication, which are standard procedures, but researchers generally don't know how to do. And the impact, keywords you need to put on an application. That's great! No one else I know has this type of centralized structure." (E)

To improve its competitiveness, all the interviewees saw that TUAS could be bolder in communicating its activities and achievements in RDI work, especially when it comes to project leadership. The ability to lead large-scale international projects was considered a strength that differentiates TUAS from other HEIs and should thus be spoken more of.

"Taking the initiative to submit proposals as a leader, might assist in competitiveness. Because it's something completely different if you are leading" (D).

On the other hand, one interviewee underlined that TUAS should trust itself and not obsess over competitiveness, because it is already doing well and very competitive (I). One interviewee commented that creating more informal networks, e.g. through mailing lists, could improve TUAS' competitiveness (H). Another commented that TUAS differentiates itself with innovation pedagogy, but sometimes this approach is perhaps too narrow, and finding a couple of core values to work on, could improve competitiveness (F).

5.5 Partnerships and cooperation

The theme of partnerships and cooperation tended to focus on the discussion of values, since the fluency of cooperation was already emphasized in other themes during the interviews. As discussed in chapter 2.2, defining organizational values and communicating to the stakeholders is essential in managing image and reputation.

Most of the interviewees found that TUAS' values are well presented in the cooperation, but two interviewees said they could not comment on TUAS' values because they don't know what they are (E, F). One interviewee commented that people working in RDI projects are inevitably "embedded" to the research field and HEI they are working for, and this is how the organizational values become distributed: *"It's important to list them [values] on the website too, but the values are communicated much more on the daily cooperation"*. (I)

Terms like open-mindedness, problem-solving, innovativeness, democracy, consensus-orientation, integrity, reliability, inclusiveness, internationality and applied knowledge were used to describe TUAS' values. TUAS' professional management and collaboration skills that came up earlier in the interview when discussing TUAS' image and reputation, were highlighted again when asked about values.

"You can see the integrity, reliability regarding communication and documentation. Everything was always organized and communicated in a very good manner. I think work ethics is a good representation of TUAS' values because you don't allow any type of incorrect documentation or financial reports. The writing of the proposal...all those things demonstrate good work ethics and professionalism." (B)

The interviewees widely found that in international cooperation HEIs should have similar, but not identical values. Having a common ground is necessary for the success of the project and the collaboration. While discussing values and its relevance to RDI collaboration, it was pointed out that specifically in the international context, there is a lot of diversity in

the ways people work and communicate, and HEIs should be able to accept these differences and turn them for the benefit of the project (A, C, D, F, G). On a broader level, however, sharing a common base of values was found key in international partnerships.

“If the mission is different, that would be good, because you can support each other. Values is more difficult, because it’s the principles that you are using. If these are different, then you have a problem. And they (values) have to be supported by the staff.” (F)

“It’s important to have a common ground, otherwise it might create problems during the collaboration. -- But people are coming from different backgrounds in terms of research, culture and social dimension, you should at some point accept that. One value should be to accept other HEIs’ values apart from the common ground and try to combine those in order to produce the best results.” (D)

One interviewee specified that the main aspect in cooperation is that the project topic fits all partners’ aims and needs, but universal values, such as equality and “*not allowing discrimination etc.*”, should be fulfilled too (E).

All interviewees found that cooperation with TUAS is very fluent and it matches the reputation TUAS has as an RDI partner. The interviewees who had been involved in more than one project with TUAS, found that the cooperation has been consistent and good, despite the changes in staff or working teams. Two interviewees even pointed out that TUAS managed personnel changes very well (G, H), possibly because “*staff at TUAS have a comparable background and working culture*” (G).

“It [cooperation with TUAS] was very professional and consistent. Always done as agreed. Sometimes you work less with your personality and more in a professional way. UK leaders work more with their personality. Everything was done in time, as expected as agreed, so it’s [cooperation] very coherent.” (C)

A few interviewees commented that the cooperation has been different with different staff (A, F) and when TUAS is leading the project instead of being a regular project partner (A, D), but this hasn’t affected the cooperation negatively. The main differences in cooperation were due to the experience that TUAS personnel had in international in project management (F) and different personalities / ways of working (A). One interviewee elaborated that the cooperation also depends on the type of the project:

“I’m currently working on Horizon projects which are very structured and demanding. Erasmus projects are also demanding but they are perhaps more about interpersonal cooperation than they are about the harder scientific output. There are different kinds of projects and I think the teams reflect the kind of work they’re in.” (A)

5.6 Summary

Throughout the interviews, it became apparent that TUAS is highly appreciated as an RDI partner and enjoys a good reputation among the interviewees. Similar attributes associated with HEIs’ positive image and reputation in general, were associated to TUAS. Moreover, factors contributing to an HEI’s positive image and reputation were linked to competitiveness in the higher education context. The interviewees found that TUAS could improve its competitiveness by emphasizing the areas it is already strong in, e.g. close relations to industry, project management and RDI administration that leads to positive funding decisions.

Much of the credit of TUAS’ “likability” goes to the people, TUAS staff members, who work in RDI projects and thus reinforce a professional outlook to the whole organization. To underline the influence of skilled project professionals on TUAS’ image and reputation, many TUAS staff members were openly praised during the interviews. This finding bolsters the management’s view, that in fact all TUAS employees act as brand ambassadors (Hartemo 2019, Härkönen 2019, Krappe 2019, Pyörre 2019).

Punctuality, integrity, strong communication and collaboration skills and innovativeness were some of characteristics that the interviewees linked to TUAS. The organization and coordination of RDI projects, i.e. the RDI Services unit, was also seen a contributing factor to TUAS’s image, one that could distinguish TUAS from other HEIs when it comes to implementation of RDI projects. The fact that TUAS employees are involved in several projects simultaneously, fortifies the image of professionalism.

The interviewees’ experience with TUAS varied from 2 years to nearly 10 years of cooperation in RDI activities. Nevertheless, there was not much variation in terms of the interviewees’ knowledge regarding TUAS as an organization. On the positive note, interviewees with more experience evaluated the cooperation with TUAS as successful and consistent throughout the years, regardless of different staff members’ way of working. Moreover, TUAS image and reputation were evaluated very similarly despite the cultural background of the interviewees.

Very little criticism towards TUAS came up during the interviews. Nevertheless, most of the interviewees lacked an overall image of TUAS' activities and they were not aware of the international marketing communications that TUAS is implementing, so one could conclude that there is room for improvement in this field. Being more confident and bolder, emphasizing the ability to lead large-scale international RDI projects and systematically communicating strong RDI outcomes were seen as areas that TUAS could improve on. On the other hand, modesty and consensus-orientation were also seen as virtues that contribute to the positive image of TUAS.

To sum, international networks are seen crucial for any HEI, and among the interviewees TUAS is regarded as a strong and highly competent actor in international RDI collaboration. The results of the interviews emphasize the importance of skilled employees: RDI cooperation is primarily done between people, not institutions. The quality of the cooperation is estimated through human actions and the image and reputation of TUAS is mainly built through those actions. Previous collaboration, personal experiences and word-of-mouth are particularly significant to the interviewees' perception of TUAS.

6 Recommendations for TUAS' international marketing communications

The findings from the interviews indicate that TUAS has a good reputation and positive image among international RDI partners. However, TUAS' image and reputation among RDI partners seems to result from personal experiences with TUAS' RDI personnel and positive word-of-mouth, rather than planned international marketing communications.

It is clear that internationalization and international marketing communications for that matter cannot be left to one unit's responsibility alone, but organization-wide collaboration is required. RDI is but one of TUAS' primary tasks and can be used to leverage TUAS international image and reputation. An international strategy would help form a holistic approach towards internationalization and steer the marketing communications activities in a desired direction.

This chapter discusses the research findings from the marketing communications point of view and suggests some development actions to consider regarding TUAS' international image and reputation.

6.1 Differentiating from competitors

Based on the interviews, TUAS is already seen competitive in the international RDI landscape. In the recent years the competition with traditional universities has increased, but so has the cooperation between UASs and traditional universities. In order to stay competitive in the accelerating race for external funding, TUAS needs to be active in relevant networks and partner with HEIs that share a strong track-record in RDI cooperation.

The interviewees recognized several attributes that differentiate TUAS from competitors, such as innovativeness, know-how in project management and administration, open communication and trustworthiness. TUAS is seen as a stable and reliable partner that thrives in professional project management and sees that projects meet their goals. A lot of credit was given to individual TUAS professionals who work in international projects, as well as the organization of project support (RDI services unit). Furthermore, Finland has a positive reputation as a country with high quality education, so this is a given asset for TUAS.

By identifying its competitors more clearly, and studying their strategies in detail, TUAS could develop its distinguishing features and focus on what makes it unique. Of course, "environmental scanning" is done in everyday work and national-level statistics assist in

planning TUAS' marketing communications, but specifically in the international level, a more systematic competitor analysis could be useful. This would allow TUAS to position itself more clearly and perhaps find new networks it strives to be a part of.

6.2 Defining key messages

The interviewees found that TUAS presents its values in the cooperation by acting as a responsible, consensus-oriented and reliable partner. Nevertheless, the values that TUAS aims to convey in its external communications, e.g. on the website, were less familiar to the interviewees. Furthermore, the interviewees' knowledge about TUAS seemed to be limited to the project they were working in. For instance, several interviewees weren't aware of the volume of RDI projects, the level of internationalization or TUAS' other activities.



Figure 14. TUAS values. (Turku University of Applied Sciences 2020a)

In the image above are TUAS' values as presented on the website www.tuas.fi/strategy. While many of the values were reflected in the interviewees' comments, some, such as "being a predecessor", "good life" and "impact" were not highlighted. The core value, "sharing competence" is not something that's clearly apparent in international RDI cooperation, at least not among the interviewed partners.

As discussed in chapter 2.3, in order to convey the desired image to external stakeholders, the internal image and external image need to be aligned. Moreover, communicators should take an active role in assuring that the values are truly intrinsic to the organization. TUAS values should first and foremost be accepted and internalized by the staff. This is a

continuous process that requires time and some progress has already been made. Nevertheless, TUAS should define some key messages to use in marketing communications – ones that resonate among the international stakeholders. The key messages need to be aligned with TUAS' strategy and values, but based on the interviews, professional project management and good work ethics are in the core of TUAS' image as a partner, and these are positive attributes that could be highlighted in TUAS' messages also.

For instance, workshops among RDI staff could help in planning marketing communications and developing key messages and tone of voice in way that acknowledges the global expert networks TUAS is a part of. The workshops could be facilitated by the Communications Services or a third party, making Communications and RDI staff collaborate in the development of international marketing communications.

6.3 Developing international social media presence

Several interviewees admitted they'd rather follow individuals than organizational pages in social media, and some found that TUAS staff members are very efficient in using social media in project communications. To have active employees who are willing and capable to use their personal social media presence to contribute to the employer's image and reputation, is an immense asset and opportunity for any organization.

It's important that TUAS offers enough tools and training for its "brand ambassadors" to spread the desired messages. For instance, what are the correct hashtags to use when tweeting about a TUAS project? #turkuamk would be the right choice in national channels, but should one use #tuas in an international context? These may seem like simple questions, yet they need to be weighed from various angles and are thus at the core of integrated marketing communications. To ensure a unified tone of voice, some ground rules regarding hashtags, channels and other social media related activities in international contexts should be made and clarified with TUAS employees.

The interviewees also mentioned they do not follow TUAS as an organization in social media. One obvious reason for this could be that most of the communication in TUAS' social media channels is in Finnish. There are several international stakeholders that know TUAS through student and staff mobility, education export or RDI collaboration, but there are currently no social media platforms to engage with these stakeholders. In order to attract new, international followers in social media, TUAS should first take a systematic approach to communicating in English. Whether one channel is entirely dedicated to international marketing communications, or English communications is added on all existing

channels, is irrelevant. The key is that TUAS as an organization begins communicating with its international stakeholders in social media.

Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, ResearchGate and Youtube were among the social media channels regarded as important for RDI communications by the interviewees. Indeed, there are a lot of opportunities but as it was stated that individuals' profiles are found more trustworthy than organizational pages, TUAS could begin developing its international presence in the channels that TUAS employees are most comfortable with.

6.4 Capitalizing on word-of-mouth marketing

Among the interviewees, word-of-mouth was regarded very important in attracting and finding new partners for RDI initiatives, whereas international HEI rankings were regarded as less relevant.

As discussed in chapter 3.1.2, capitalizing on word-of-mouth marketing requires approaching "leveraged influencers" who will reach the maximum amount of people in the most credible way. Supplying these influencers with sufficient materials and tools is essential, in order to make sure the messages spread in desired way. TUAS has already been active in recognizing and supplying the TUAS experts that have wide networks and reach a lot of people in social media. Likewise, recognizing the "leveraged influencers" among international RDI partners could help TUAS reach international audiences without an excessive marketing budget.

The TUAS Fellow program, which aims to extend TUAS' collaboration nationally and internationally through invited experts (Turku University of Applied Sciences 2020c) is a promising initiative regarding WOM marketing. It's important to ensure that the international TUAS Fellows are not kept under the radar when planning international marketing communications.

6.5 International events as a marketing tool

While technology has allowed endless opportunities for HEIs' cooperation across borders, international conferences and face-to-face meetings still have an important role especially when it comes to finding new partners or discussing RDI initiatives. TUAS organizes inter-

national weeks a few times a year, inviting HE staff across the globe to discuss RDI initiatives or other cooperation. In addition, TUAS staff members travel for work and visit several international conferences and international weeks during the academic year.

As discussed in the theoretical part of this thesis, and supported by the research findings, it can be stated that every encounter a TUAS employee has with an international stakeholder is meaningful for the image and reputation of TUAS. Attending international events is an investment requiring a lot of resources and should thus not be planned half-heartedly. Furthermore, international events are an arena to showcase TUAS' results and initiate much desired RDI cooperation with reputable HEIs.

To ensure that TUAS is presented in a consistent manner that supports a positive image and reputation, more attention should be paid to event marketing. Employees need to be aware that their behaviour is heavily linked to TUAS' image as an organization, especially in the case that they are representing TUAS solo at an international event, and the marketing is based on human encounters rather than materials or presentations. Moreover, TUAS as a Finnish HEI is easily associated with high quality education and Finland's positive reputation abroad should also be embraced. Luckily, there is an abundance of marketing material available for use e.g. on the Visit Finland website.

To train employees for international encounters, a "toolkit" providing information in English about TUAS and Finland and some tips how to handle most common situations in international context, could be useful. The idea is to make sure that an employee can briefly introduce TUAS and its offering as an entity, and not only from a project's, faculty's, or team's point of view. For instance, a single project meeting abroad can lead to new or added international cooperation in terms of publications, joint degrees etc., if one just happens to run into the right people. Furthermore, there are several internationally minded employees at TUAS who could act as "international mentors" for anyone taking part in international relations.

6.6 Newsletters for international stakeholders

TUAS' marketing communications activities with international stakeholders are fragmented and spread across different units and teams within the organization. In the last few years, a more systematic approach to sending newsletters to TUAS' various stakeholders has been developed with respect to integrated marketing communications. A similar approach could be beneficial when reaching to international stakeholders.

For instance, a newsletter combining information about TUAS' international weeks or webinars, exchange application deadlines or new RDI projects and networks would reflect the vast array of international activities at TUAS and thus support the international image of TUAS. This kind of newsletter wouldn't rule out the topical newsletters targeted to marginal stakeholder groups but boost them and bring a sense of consistency to TUAS' international marketing communications.

7 Discussion

The focus of this study was to understand, what is the image and reputation of TUAS among international RDI partners, and how TUAS could leverage RDI activity to develop international marketing communications to foster its image and reputation. The findings from the theme interviews emphasized the importance of personal relationships in building TUAS' image and reputation. TUAS' marketing communications, however, had not significantly affected the interviewees' image or perceived reputation of TUAS.

This chapter discusses the trustworthiness and learning outcomes of the thesis. Furthermore, topics for future research on image and reputation, marketing communications and international relations in the context of higher education are proposed.

7.1 Trustworthiness and limitations

In all research, the results must be reliable and valid. Reliability and validity are also common indicators to measure the quality of research. In qualitative research, reliability and validity are always subject to the researcher's own evaluation and proofs, which makes it somewhat impossible to attain objective reliability. Reliability refers to the consistency and repeatability of the research, whereas validity concerns the research design and the relevance of research methods and objects. (Kananen 2017, 173-175.)

The research design, definition of the research problem, methodology and research implementation contribute to the evaluation of reliability and validity of one's research. To ensure the quality and reliability of the research results, reliability and validity evaluation should be considered already at the very beginning of the research process. The following factors are commonly seen as contributing to the reliability and validity of research:

- confirmation of the informant
- triangulation
- documentation
- consistency of the analysis
- saturation
- previous research.

(Kananen 2017, 177.)

Language is an obvious limitation factor in the data collection phase. All nine interviews were conducted in English, which is not the native language of the researcher, nor most of the interviewees. Two of the interviewees spoke English as a native language. A simple

way to confirm the reliability of the research results and that the answers have been rightly interpreted, is to allow the interviewees to review the research report (Kananen 2017, 117). After transcribing and analyzing the interviews, a report of the findings including direct quotations was sent to all interviewees for review and to diminish the effect of language barriers on the results.

Triangulation, i.e. exploring the research problem from different perspectives and using multiple data sources, can add to the validity of the research (Kananen 2017, 178). In this thesis, both documentation and interviews were used to increase the understanding of the studied phenomenon. In addition, having a work background at TUAS' different units focusing on RDI, communications, business and most recently international relations, the researcher held a broad view of the organizational matters and HEI marketing in general. Access to internal documents and discussions with colleagues holding key positions related to RDI, marketing and international relations were also valuable and added to the understanding of the phenomenon.

The problem of proper documentation was addressed by explanation and justification of chosen research methods and assuring that the research evidence is properly handled and reserved. Internal validity refers to the possible differences in the interpretation of data, specifically when the data is collected with theme interviews. The internal validity of research is strong, if another researcher makes the same conclusions of the collected data. (Kananen 2017, 178-179.) However, in this study the conclusions are made solely by the thesis writer and the internal validity cannot therefore be entirely assured.

Saturation in qualitative research indicates reliability. For instance, in case study research the number of interviews cannot be predetermined, but the researcher should constantly analyze the data and once the answers begin to repeat themselves, the saturation point is met. The similarity of previous research results also adds to the reliability and validity. (Kananen 2017, 179.)

In this study, the replies regarding most interview themes started to be repetitive after five interviews and the saturation was considered met. Some nuances differed but the main insights became repetitive quite quickly. Previous research in image, reputation and marketing communications discussed in chapters 2 and 3 supports the interview findings, especially in the sense that TUAS' image and reputation were evaluated through its actions and word-of-mouth was regarded as a significant factor regarding new RDI initiatives.

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the RDI partners' perspectives on TUAS' image and reputation, the aim was to interview partners who had at least couple years' experience of working with TUAS. This would allow the evaluation of how TUAS' image has possibly developed over the years, and to what extent the varying research teams affect the image and reputation. However, asking colleagues' recommendations for possible interviewees easily leads to a situation where only "friendly" partners are recommended and interviewed, and the answers might then lack a sufficiently critical stance.

While the researcher's background at TUAS can add to the understanding of the studied phenomenon, it can also be seen to weaken the objectivity of the research. It's difficult to say whether the interviewees felt completely comfortable in expressing their honest views about TUAS to an employee of the respective organization, especially when discussing the matters that could be improved. Furthermore, whilst being trusted partners of TUAS, the interviewees can also be regarded as competitors, since partner networks in RDI projects are rarely static. The fact that the researcher did not have previous relations with any the interviewed partners, however, can be regarded as a "neutralizing" factor.

The interviewees represented several different countries and HEIs, and could thus be seen to have presented a comprehensive and international sampling. The interviewees were from HEIs located in the UK, South Africa, Hungary, Greece, France, Netherlands, Italy and Spain.

7.2 Reflection of the thesis process

The researcher's personal aim for this thesis was to raise awareness of the impact international RDI activities have on TUAS' image and reputation, and to bring forth TUAS' international stakeholders' perspectives, which hadn't been widely studied before. Furthermore, the aim was to provide insights that could be utilized in the development of TUAS' international marketing communications.

The thesis process began in spring 2019 by writing the theoretical part, and the initial timetable had December 2019 as the deadline for the finalized thesis. While the initial deadline was not met, the empirical part of the thesis was conducted within reasonable time in spring 2020, and thus did not affect the validity of the results. The theoretical framework was also iterated during the data collection and analysis.

During the thesis process, TUAS addressed some key issues regarding internationalization and RDI related marketing communications. For instance, work on an internationalization strategy has been initiated and a new “ambassador program” coaches TUAS employees on several communications related topics to strengthen TUAS’ image as an expert organization. More RDI projects are presented on TUAS’ English website than before, as project teams are required to provide a summary of their project in both languages for it to be published on the website. Nevertheless, the initial research problem of the thesis remained relevant throughout the process.

Despite the delay in the thesis process, the study managed to answer the initial research question, “*What is the image and reputation of TUAS among international RDI partners?*”, with the chosen method of semi-structured theme interviews. The theoretical framework of image, reputation and marketing communications supported the analysis and research findings. During the thesis process, the researcher was able to view the research topic from different angles, as her work tasks at TUAS shifted from marketing communications to international relations. Regarding the research objectives and scope, the researcher considers the learning process successful.

In retrospect, additional research methods could have brought more useful solutions for developing TUAS’ international marketing communications. For instance, the interviewees could’ve been asked to evaluate TUAS’ website or marketing materials beforehand, to create deeper understanding of the current state of TUAS’ international marketing communications and what needs to be improved. Furthermore, benchmarking other HEIs’ international marketing communications could’ve contributed to more comprehensive recommendations for TUAS.

7.3 Suggestions for future research

Marketing communications channels and expert image

This study discussed some suitable channels for RDI related marketing communications but did not make detailed propositions regarding the effectiveness of specific channels. As TUAS aims to project itself as an internationally competent expert organization (TUAS 2020), a study examining a larger sampling of international stakeholders could contribute to the knowledge of which channels are most effective in building an expert image.

International RDI collaboration amid crisis

A survey of about 3 000 users of the academic social network ResearchGate suggested that many researchers were finding more time to strengthen international ties amid the

COVID-19 crisis (Baker 2020). To test this result in a local context, a study conducted among TUAS RDI practitioners could weight the risks and opportunities related to international RDI collaboration during the COVID-19 crisis and bring forth best practices for further development once the crisis is over.

Aligning image and culture to develop brand

As discussed in chapter 2.3, an effective branding strategy requires alignment in the organization's vision, culture and image. This study focused on TUAS' image among international stakeholders, but to uncover a potential gap between image and culture, TUAS' employees' perceptions should be further examined. For instance, comparing, e.g., RDI personnel's image of TUAS with the image that partners hold of TUAS, would bring valuable insights to branding work and ensure that TUAS is "practicing what it preaches".

Developing research communications

The value of professional research communications for an organization's reputation was discussed in chapter 2.2. At TUAS, it is expected that each RDI project communicates its activities and results but being an expert on a specific field of research is not equal to professional research communications. A study examining the main challenges that RDI practitioners find in research communications could help in concentrating the support services and possible training in areas where it's most needed.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview frame

Potential interview questions

The aim of this study is to understand what is the image and reputation of Turku University of Applied Sciences (TUAS) among international research, development and innovation (RDI) partners, and which factors mainly influence their perception of TUAS.

Based on the results of interviews and an overview of related literature and data, the thesis will conclude with findings and recommendations to consider in TUAS' international marketing communications.

Main concepts:

*“**Reputation** refers to rather stable shared perceptions of how the general public feels about an organization, whereas **image** is mainly cognitively oriented, dealing with a person's own knowledge and more transient beliefs about an organization. Typically, an organization has multiple images, as various stakeholders hold different images of the same organization.”*

LIEVENS, F., 2017. Organizational image/reputation.

Image and reputation in higher education

- Concerning a higher education institution's (HEI) image and reputation, which qualities do you think matter?
- How does international RDI collaboration affect a HEI's reputation?
- How trustworthy do you find HEI rankings? Do they affect the initiatives your institution takes regarding international RDI collaboration?

Image and reputation of TUAS

- How do you find TUAS' reputation as a HEI?
- How would you describe TUAS' image? What are its strengths and weaknesses?
- Which factors contribute to your image of TUAS?
- How could TUAS improve its international image and reputation?

Marketing communications

- What do you consider the most important marketing communications channels for HEIs? Are they the same nationally and internationally?
- How does word-of-mouth affect HEIs' image and reputation?
- How does TUAS' marketing communications affect your image of TUAS?
- Do you find active presence in social media important for TUAS's image?

- In regard to RDI, which social media channels are important? In which should TUAS be more active in?
- Does TUAS emphasize RDI activity in its (international) marketing communications? Should it be emphasized more / less? Why?
- Should it be focused more on the results, or the action?

Competitive advantage

- In your view, how can HEIs gain competitive advantage?
- Which organizations do you consider TUAS' main competitors?
- Does TUAS differentiate from its competitors, and if so, how?
- How could TUAS improve its competitiveness?

Partnerships and cooperation

- Do you find that TUAS has communicated its values well? In which channels?
- Is it important for HEIs to have similar values, when working in international RDI projects? How can they affect the cooperation?
- How would you describe your cooperation with TUAS? Is it fluent?
- Does the cooperation match TUAS' reputation?
- Is the cooperation with TUAS consistent (independent of different staff members' way of working)?