

Stories that communicate a distinctive identity

CLAIM FOR DISTINCTIVENESS:

A research intensive university which seeks to excel in both research and teaching and sees the two as synergistic, delivered in an inclusive academic culture – ‘Elite without being elitist’



PROFESSOR SIR ROBERT BURGESS

THE VC'S VIEW:

“At Leicester we don’t just say that we do very good research and very good teaching – one informs the other. It’s core to our mission. I remember in the discussions we had when we approved our mission statement; we said, it’s not enough to just be good at one of these – we’re good at both of them.

“At the same time, we are an inclusive university – the only top-20 university in the UK that meets and exceeds its benchmarks for the proportion of students who come here from state schools and the proportion of students who are admitted to the university from social classes III-manual, IV and V. We are very committed to working with those students and we are enthusiastic about making it clear that that is one of our core purposes.

“People say we’re a friendly university. You can’t make that the primary proposition, but it’s definitely part of the proposition. It fits with the promise behind ‘elite without being elitist’ and it’s part of being situated in a vibrant, multicultural city. It all speaks of inclusiveness.”

HOW DID THEY WORK TOWARDS THEIR DISTINCTIVE IDENTITY?

According to Richard Taylor, Leicester's Director of Corporate Affairs and Planning, the approach that Leicester has taken started with a substantial listening exercise. "You can't create a proposition that is untrue – otherwise people think it's marketing guff and fraud", he says. So Leicester conducted a large number of interviews and focus groups, with all stakeholder groups, to condense the proposition into four core elements:

- inclusive and accessible
- a personal, supportive experience
- high quality and innovative
- synergistic teaching and research.

This provided a consensus, and a basis from which to develop the proposition. They then used storytelling to make these values 'live', both for internal audiences, and for visitors to the website.

Next, embedding the identity and core values at the institution was essential. Part of the work was already done. As Richard says, "I don't expect everyone to walk around with a pledge card saying 'I agree to be elite without being elitist.' But in a way it doesn't matter. Because we took the proposition from what everyone felt anyway, our staff and students are elite without being elitist, whether they articulate it like that or not."

They further embedded the core values through changes to a set of processes including, for example, the promotions policy. There was a policy in place for research, but arrangements for promotion in teaching were less developed. By changing that, they were able to ensure that the expressed importance of teaching was reflected in the way in which it was rewarded.

WHAT DID THEY LEARN?

You have to have the support of the Vice-Chancellor if you're going to communicate your strategy effectively. This was the case from the outset at Leicester, and is on-going in the way the VC talks about the institution.

The positioning has to be true – so it's really important Leicester remains objectively the most socially inclusive of Britain's top-20 universities – and also palatable to the senior management team in the institution. It's also not realistic to expect everyone to repeat the 'company line', but they do need to be persuaded of how it is relevant to the way in which they work. There are three tasks involved in arriving at a distinctive identity:

- Identify what it is that makes the institution special.
- Find an excellent creative expression of that.
- Align the whole institution, and its ways of working, with that identity.

Media coverage doesn't build reputation or brand. It can confirm brand, but if you don't have a firm idea of who you want to be and what you want to be known for, it'll just be another story about a piece of interesting research in a British university.

Understanding what your 'territory' really is – and isn't – enables you to be more focused about how you present the institution, both visually and in words. For example, Leicester's recruitment materials talk primarily about the passion of their teaching staff and the value that research brings to the learning. Messages around, say, the city's nightlife are relegated to a secondary position as they are not what the university competes on.

HOW DO THEY KNOW THAT IT'S WORKING?

They conduct a biennial reputation survey, benchmarking against other institutions regarding what their audiences think and know about Leicester.

Further, the media, and researchers, come to Leicester whenever they are looking for the voice of inclusive, quality HE.