

## **‘Talented student’, ‘future leader’ or ‘you’ – student naming in highly ranked business schools’ mission statements**

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### **Abstract**

Organisations usually address their stakeholders in their external communication. We can argue, that in case of higher education institutions, the most important stakeholders are the students. Accordingly, to answer the question how students are addressed by business schools, we have investigated the mission statements of the top 100 business schools based on Times Higher Education list in 2019. These expressions are not only identity markers delineating the ideal students, but also invoke different feelings and images. Our results highlighted the complex nature of business schools balancing between academic and business-related professional language use.

**Keywords:** business schools, external communication, labelling, students, mission statements

### **Introduction**

Organisations in their external communication almost always address their most important stakeholders and often reflect on and emphasise the value they create for these parties. This is because they need to justify their existence in the social arena. Moreover, in a competitive situation, they emphasise their unique value compared to others. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are in a special position in this sense, since there is considerable normative pressure to justify their *raison d'être* and show what social role(s) they play. They are also in a quasi-market situation in which they are competing for the best and brightest students. So, it is not a surprise that one of the most important and most often utilised arguments in this regard is the value they offer to the short and long-term lives of their students. That is why it is an interesting question how these institutions address their main stakeholders, that is, the students.

In order to answer this question, we have investigated the mission statements of highly ranked business schools gathering and analysing the various expressions these institutions utilise for describing students. The different expressions are much more than simple synonyms. These terms can be considered identity markers, that is, they identify groups thereby delineating the outlines of the ideal (prospective) students. In this manner, this type of naming has both inclusive and exclusive functions. Furthermore, these expressions also differ in terms of their respective connotational space surrounding them. In other words, they invoke different impressions, feelings, ideations, as well as future images, both building on and shaping the

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collective, shared understanding of what it means to be a student.

Labelling (or naming), therefore, is an important discursive tool. As James Paul Gee explained, it is part of the “recognition work” and is closely connected to visibility and identification (Gee, 2011, p. 20). This recognition work, as well as gaining and maintaining visibility, are essential for international highly ranked business schools since they are especially sensitive to customer-needs and operate in a highly market-oriented segment of global higher education.

Based on the above-mentioned arguments, the main question of this brief research paper might be formulated as follows: in the international arena of business schools, what expressions can we find to identify and describe students? To be more specific: Is there a strong emphasis on marketisation utilising a quasi-personal and informal language of consumerism based on ‘you’ as student? Or can we find traces of a profit-oriented outlook stressing professional future identities? The former question is connected to the literature criticising business-schools while the latter is more characteristic in the general academic discourse about higher education.

As for the structure of the paper, it follows the usual template of research papers. The next section discusses the conceptual background, which is followed by the methodological details of our research. The third section focuses on the main results, while the concluding section offers an additional interpretative layer by showing how naming students can be considered a discursive act.

### **Conceptual framework**

Higher education institutions are complex social actors, and as such, they are connected to numerous communities. Among them the students are the most important stakeholder group (Jongbloed et al., 2008). This in itself made it necessary to constantly address and engage them with targeted and active communication. Furthermore, due to global competition between the universities and the increasing financial pressure the HEIs are turning into organisational actors, who strategically plan their own actions to reach their predefined goals by implementing management processes and tools, such as stakeholder management or strategic organisational communication (Krücken – Meier, 2006). Among these management and communication tools, mission statements are one of the prominent ones. Accordingly, our focus is on the highly ranked business schools’ mission statements.

Looking at the relevant literature, we can find long lists of purposes a mission statement could or should attain. These contain, for example, the reason for being (Fugazzotto 2009), the commitment to a specific plan, or they provide guide to activities (Woodrow 2006) or inspire and motivate through shared sense of purpose (Morphew – Hartley 2006).

However, most of the research dealing with the analysis of HEI’s missions concluded that they are homogenous (Davies – Glaister 1996, Özdem 2011), too general or just mirror the policy documents (James – Huisman, 2009). Therefore, they are not effective enough. Nevertheless, as Morphew and Hartley (2006) pointed out, the mission statements have a normative function, that is, even their mere existence legitimates the given organization as an organization, because a mission statement is one of the identifying elements of the organizational field. This legitimising power is there even if the content of the missions is not specific enough to reach all the above -mentioned purposes.

Moreover, and this was not mentioned in the literature, the mission statements have a discursive power, as well. They have a discursive power at the organizational and general level, for example, by naming the relevant and most important stakeholder groups. Therefore, even if the mission statements are not effective enough to moving an institution to a given direction or providing long-term goals and structure, they can be regarded as a discourse (or, at least, a slice of a discourse) where these institutions ‘talk about’ their social role and purposes and identify their most important communities. Regarding the latter one, we analysed whether and how the highly ranked business schools address their main stakeholders, namely, the students.

However, quite little research focused solely on the students either as the main audience (e.g., Sauntson – Morrish, 2010) or as their naming on websites, which could lead to latent institutional logic (Lažetić, 2019). These analyses connect the marketisation of higher education both to the enhanced online communication of HEIs and to the content and labelling approaches they apply on these platforms. However, as the examples indicate, these results suggest bipolar proposition. That is, the HEIs are either addressing their present and prospective students in a marketized manner as customers, or in an academic-claimed manner as novices (Lazetic, 2019). In our research, we will keep an open mind in order to explore whether the naming of students in the mission statements is polarized by this duality or is it more complex. Especially, because our analysis focuses on highly ranked business schools' communication, which is a special case. A business school is the very part of a university where the mission-related subjects (like marketing-communication, stakeholder management, consumer-targeting etc.) are taught and researched. Accordingly, we could expect them to excel in these platforms and communication. However, business schools were criticized fiercely in the last twenty years for their lack of ethical considerations and efforts to maintain the neoliberal economic approach without taking into account social and environmental consequences and responsibility (e.g., Rocha et al., 2021; Schlegelmilch, 2020). Therefore, we could expect them to be more cautious in their external communication. These diverse forces provide a complex environment to highly ranked business schools and make it quite ambiguous what we can expect from them when we look at their student-related naming strategies.

## **Methodology**

The highly ranked business schools were identified using the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Ranking List, which is one of the globally accepted and acknowledged ranking lists. THE provides not only a general world-wide ranking but also sub-rankings by subjects. From the latter one we concentrated on the 'business and economics' list in 2019.

As a next step we searched the website of each university's business school, especially those that present the school to the general public (i.e., the 'About us' sections). This way we were able to collect the explicit mission statements from the web pages. We identified 97 institutions that had either explicit mission statements or they had statements on their webpages that could be regarded as mission statements, but they have not labelled them as such. The three institutions that did not have mission or mission-like statements were the University of Vienna, Paris Sciences et Lettres – PSL Research University Paris and The University of Tokyo. We excluded them from further analysis.

## **Results**

### **Identified names of student groups in mission statements**

The mission statements of the 97 institutions were analysed to see how they described their subjects. Out of the 97 there were 14 (15%) which did not contain any description about the subjects (or their future students) of their mission or mission-like statement, for example Michigan Ross's statement was: 'We are committed to building a better world through business.' In this case it is not clear who they are/would be acting for, who their future students would be(come); whereas Harvard University stated: 'We educate leaders who make a difference in the world', which is clearly about 'leaders'.

In the end, we were able to identify and code the subjects of the mission statements of 83 organisations, so we obtained 9 main categories (Table 1) based on how they spoke about their future students. For example, we grouped together those who used expressions like 'graduates', 'learners', 'undergraduates', 'postgraduates' as well as 'students' and we divided 'leaders' and 'business' leaders' as there seemed to be two distinct categories.

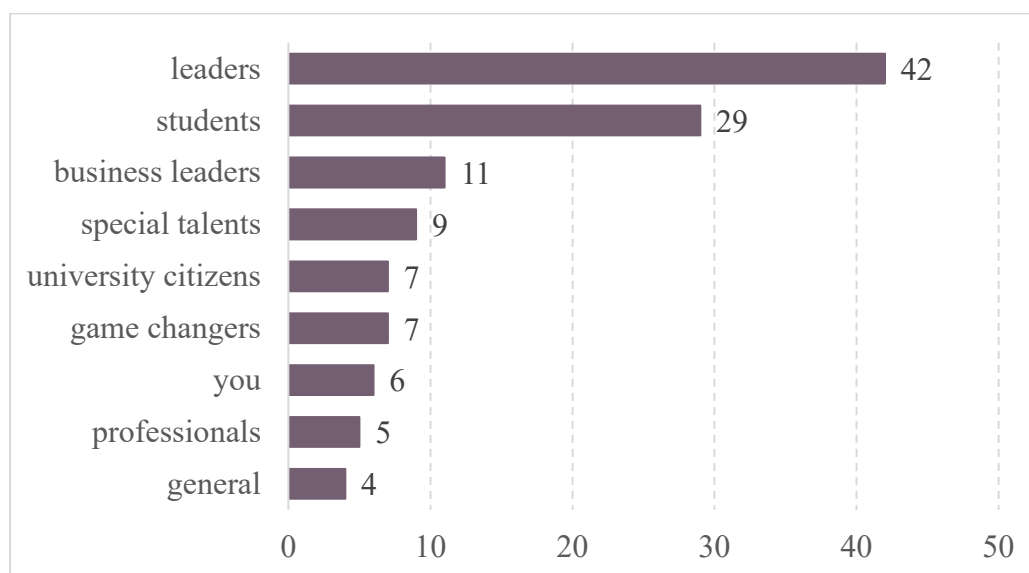
Table 1. Identified naming categories and the exact expressions used in mission statements

No	Category	Used expressions
1	students	students, graduates, undergraduates, postgraduates, learners
2	business leaders	business leaders, business elite, builders of enterprises
3	leaders (not business)	leaders, executives
4	you	you
5	special talents	courageous thinker, bold thinkers, inquisitive minds, independent minds, top talent, core talents, first-class talent, extraordinary people, exemplary citizens
6	game changers	change maker, people who leave a mark on the world, future international decision-makers, innovator, pioneers, entrepreneurs, difference makers
7	professionals	professionals, experts, people in business
8	university citizens	alumni, our people, our community, new scholars and teachers, academics, scholars, academic specialist
9	general expressions	both young and experienced people, individuals, our stakeholders, our main stakeholders

Source: own research

Figure 1 below displays the frequency of the 9 categories that we identified with ‘leaders’ occupying the prime spot (42 mentions out of 83), followed by ‘students’ (29 mentions out of 83). From this analysis the words ‘leader’, ‘student’ and potentially ‘you’ stood out, so we decided to investigate further these words within our texts.

Figure 1. Number of mission statements using the given categories’ expressions (n=83)

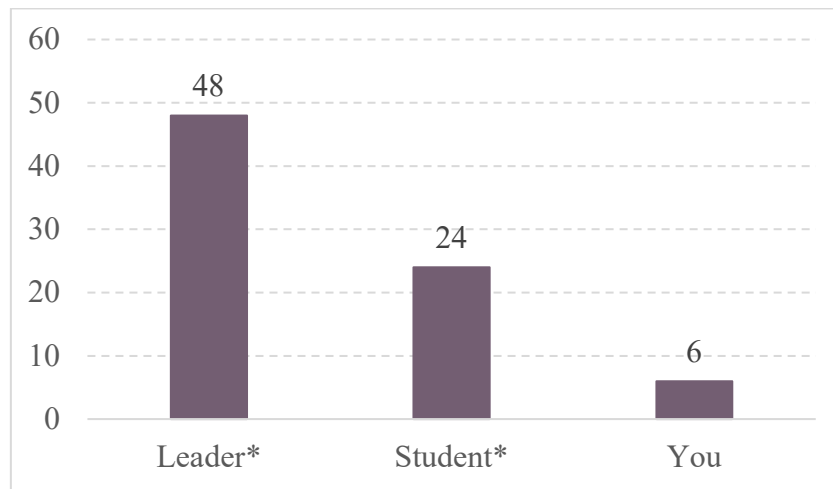


Source: own research

Specialities related to ‘student’, ‘leader’ and ‘you’ expressions

We looked at the frequency of the words ‘leader’, ‘student’ and ‘you’ within our mission statement texts. Figure 2 below displays the frequency of each of them.

Figure 2. The number of mission statements using 'leader', 'student' or 'you' expressions



Source: own research (\*Exact word and its plural form as well.)

It is apparent that mission statements overwhelmingly use the word 'leader' whereas 'you' is very rarely used. Table 2 contains the adjectives used with the words 'students' and 'leaders' or 'business leaders'. It is interesting to note that there is a separation between 'leaders' and 'business leaders' in the sense that mission statements that use one they do not use the other. It might be worth investigating qualitatively what the differences in perceptions are when opting for one against the other. By looking at the adjectives it is apparent that the qualities of 'leaders' and 'business leaders' are intertwined.

Table 2. Adjectives connected to 'students', 'leaders' and 'you' expressions

Label	Connected adjectives
<b>students</b>	talented, local
<b>business leaders</b>	innovative, purposeful and ethical future, tomorrow's, forward-thinking, next generation of, global
<b>leaders (not business)</b>	wise, transformational, principled, tomorrow's, innovative, ethical, responsible, current, future, global, purposeful, effective, aspiring, dynamic, insightful, a new kind of, brave, entrepreneurial, social, next
<b>you</b>	-

Source: own research

Overall, there is a stronger preference among Top 100 business schools to refer to 'leaders' in their mission statements followed by 'students' whereas 'you' is almost entirely missing.

### Conclusions

In conclusion, the analysed mission and mission-like statements do mirror some of the presented concepts on the marketization of higher education and their signs in the external language use of HEIs, specifically in the case of business schools. However, there are some

differences and variabilities that deserve to be highlighted. These notions, we believe, help nuance the understanding of mission statements as an interdiscursive mix instead of being strictly marketized or academic.

On the one hand, almost 15% of the analysed mission statements do not mention their (future) students explicitly. That is, according to Fairclough (1993), a characteristic of ‘the institutional voice of a traditional university’, as with the impersonal texts the school presents itself on a take-it-or-leave-it basis, without deliberately addressing the students’ needs. In addition, the label ‘student’ is present in almost quarter of the mission statements and is also a labelling choice still closer to the ‘traditional academic advertising’ (Fairclough, 1993). Although it is explicit, it is also impersonal due to the third person naming and it addresses the students in their academic role in the institutions. These labelling techniques do not show the signs of the marketization of higher education but adhere to the more traditional ‘academic’ language use. Concerning the use of ‘you’ that is also considered to be a linguistic tool of the marketization of higher education (Fairclough, 1993; Lažetić, 2019) for its role as a means of synthetic personalization, it was the least frequently used label in our corpus. This does not mean, of course, that the mission and mission-like statements of the top-ranked business schools do not show the signs of the marketization of public discourse, but rather that the mission statement is a moving structure (Askehave, 2007) which does not employ this tool of marketization. On the contrary, some scholars argue that the mere existence of mission statements in higher education is itself the consequence and tool of the marketization of HE (Sauntson – Morrish, 2010). Furthermore, the highly ranked business schools seem to much more prefer the terms ‘leader’ and ‘business leader’. While both labels are used in third person, they are generally part of the managerial language use. Moreover, these labelling methods mirror a discursive construction of a professional identity that is detached from the students’ academic role and persona and is in close connection with the predicted future success on the labour market. Therefore, they do not present school as a solely academic institution, but rather a hub that is interested in preparing its customers for future economic success instead of focusing on learning for the sake of learning. Thus, in the case of business schools, ‘leader’ and ‘business leader’ labels seem to take over the role of ‘you’ in that they construct and contribute to the marketization of higher education.

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