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Influencing perceived employer brand under changing organizational structure

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Abstract

Employer brand is a set of perceived common ideas; it acts as a USP when examining a positioning of an employer on the market. Organisations have a set of values that they communicate internally for current employees and externally through talent acquisition practices. These values are enforced consciously, but also un-consciously through general HR practices. In this article, we aim to contrast actual and perceived employer brand by the employees, when undergoing a changing corporate environment. In the study, we focus on the effects of new organisational structure, new leadership and new communication practices through the change of maintainers in the case of universities in Hungary, that went from being under governmental direction, to being managed by foundations. In our research, we appraise capital and rural universities and look for correlations with the process of model shifting. We examine the effects of communication channel preference on employees and suggest, how employer brand can be influenced by effective communication practices. Our ascertainments during the research primarily are based on qualitative personal interview examinations. Generally, it can be stated that there are discrepancies in the communicated and perceived employer brands, there is a change of employer brand at the same time resulting from the management and organisational change, and that people have clear preferences based on trust when examining communication channels, thus effectiveness of communicated ideas is influenced greatly.

Keywords: communication channels; job engagement; organizational model shift; marketing communication; maintaining business attractiveness

1. Introduction

As a result of continuous development and globalization, there are now a number of challenges to face for both workers and employers. Due to the radical changes in the labor market, companies are not in an easy position: it is very difficult to find good, reliable, valuable workforce, especially in the long run (Nagy, 2021)

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Today in the job market competition a good job advertisement is definitely not enough, companies need to pay special attention to find suitably qualified, competent professional workers. Of course, this also means that a serious change of attitude is needed on the part of the companies. The notion of “be glad you have a job” must be forgotten, because a competent employee is on demand. So what can we do to get and keep good workforce?

In the struggle for well-trained employees, it is not only the acquisition of new labour that can be a problem, but also the retention of those already employed. Employer branding can be an effective tool in this fight, which can help a company stand out from its competitors (Kondás, 2020). We chose this topic for our study, because it demonstrates that in the long run, an employer can be successful in an ever-changing business environment solely as a result of a well-structured strategy that relies on all employees. In our study, we examined the significance of the employer brand in the case of higher education institutions. Based on the international models, the process in which the institutions are taken over by foundations to maintain instead of the state has started in Hungary as well. We examined the impact of this on the employer image from the aspect of employees, i.e., internal brand building.

2. Employer Branding

The definition of a brand is still controversial and in many cases different. According to Philip Kotler (1998, p. 491), the purpose of a brand is “to identify and differentiate the products or services of a particular group of seller or sellers from its competitors.” In this article, we present a special version of a brand with two main participants, the employer who has created and maintains the brand and the employee who participates in this process as a consumer. One of the most important goals of this type of marketing activity of the employer is to create a positive image that affects not only the employees within the company, but also the external participants who come into contact with it (Töröcsik, 2018). The definition of an employer brand was first defined by Simon Barrow and Tim Ambler in their joint study “The employer brand” published in 1996.

Based on this, the employer brand is a package of material and psychology remuneration that is provided by the employer and can be linked to the company in both value and message. Employer branding can be viewed from the perspective of potential or already employed people, as the company's financial, business, and psychological attractiveness and the ability of a company with a strong employer branding to attract highly qualified people.

In all cases, the basis of a really stable employer brand strategy is the EVP, the employer's value proposition, meaning the added value that the employer can provide to its employees. EPV is unique to each employer and is part of a human resource management strategy (Berthon et al. 2005).

The components of the EVP can be divided into several groups:

1. Economic group (remuneration, compensation, reward),
2. Development group (training, career management),

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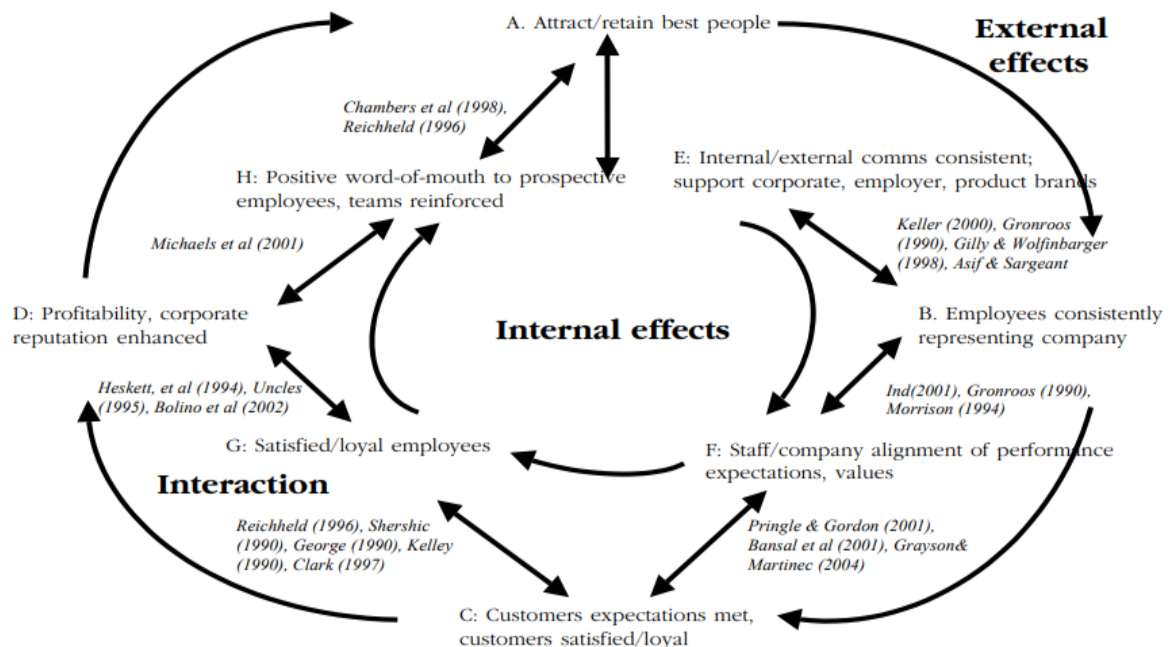
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3. Work environment value (good, varied working conditions),
4. Community value (regarding the social life of the employee),
5. Employer reputation (credible employer image) (Jiang & Iles, 2011).

A well-chosen employer value proposition based on the previous criterion reinforces the positive effects of employer branding, can keep existing employees, and attract new potential employees (Kondás, 2020).

There are two ways to interpret an employer brand: based on its external and internal effects (Moroko & Uncles, 2005). On the one hand external effects typically focus on future workers, and may include: the quality of the future workforce, the motivation of the applicants, the minimization of replacement costs, and an attractive labor market status. On the other hand internal effects is understood as a ‘contract’ between an employer and an employee, in which common strategic goals are defined. Internal impacts may include productivity and loyalty, retention of skilled employees, proper communication between employee and employer, and achievement of organizational goals (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The external and the internal effects of the employer branding



Source: Moroko-Uncles, 2005. page 5.

Internal value creation in the workplace is the best way for employees to identify with the organizational vision. When employees care about the employer brand, they become more

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motivated to work hard, their loyalty to the organization grows, and common goals are created. What supports this process is proper organizational communication (Mitchell, 2002).

3. Credibility and “Prestige” in communication

When factoring in organisational changes, internal and external communication will influence the credibility of the organisation on one side and the credibility of the whole change process. A line of factors need to be considered when planning the communication strategy, including the brand and positioning of the organisation, the personal and organisational credibility of the sender, the form and associated communication channels when sending the message and finally the effects of noise. In the classical model of communication, a sender codes a message, sends it off through a channel to the receiver who decodes it. One of the negative factors influencing the effectiveness of this communication is noise.

Kotler and Levy (1969) defines two ways that marketing can be viewed, one of which is a system of persuading and influencing the consumer, that understanding is more in line with the objectives of this article. When we examine consumers’ communication channel preferences we can conclude that the type and number of channels used by a person show socio-cultural differences (Lind, 2001). Cultural differences affect not only preference but also channel efficiency (Brettel and Spilker-Attig, 2010). Because of these differences, some prefer oral and some other forms of written or symbolic messages. Compared to verbal communication, written communication naturally provides more time to structure and refine what is being said, so the message is more accurate (Berger and Iyengar, 2013). This logic can be similarly applied to symbolic messages like pictures. In the following we will look at the different factors that influence credibility, namely the organisation or the brand, the message, the communication channel and noise.

How can we define credibility in terms of communication? Credibility can be understood as an assessment of the source. The expertise and objectivity related to the topic is a factor that builds trust and positively influences opinion. Credibility is strongly correlated with the attitude towards a given brand (Goldsmith et al. 2000), so the more positive the perception of the communicating organization in the eyes of the consumer, regardless of his knowledge and knowledge of the information, the more credible the message will be. The prestige of the source and the person together determine the general authenticity of the information (Tóth, 2009).

Good communication practices bring all together, creating synergies. The research of Heideker and Steul-Fischer (2017) supports this idea, as they find a strong correlation between the effect of credibility and the source-based trust mark when examining the credibility of advertisements to assess risks. The effectiveness of the communication activity is greatly and negatively affected by the practical implementation, on the basis of which it may be a problem that the activity is inconsistent or that a condition, such as financial and human resources are lacking (Piskóti, 2010). Other factors that have an effect on trust, if considering the spokesperson are body language, tone and intonation, words, and speech structure (Busa et al. 2015; Gnams, 2019).

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If the consumer receives the message from his or her own socio-cultural group, he or she trusts it more than if it comes from another outside group (Iyer, et al. 2017). Regardless of the content of the message, receiving it through the consumer's own preferred communication channel has a positive effect on credibility. It is necessary to encode this message based on the preferences of the channel and the target group, as different groups, such as age groups, react differently to the messages.

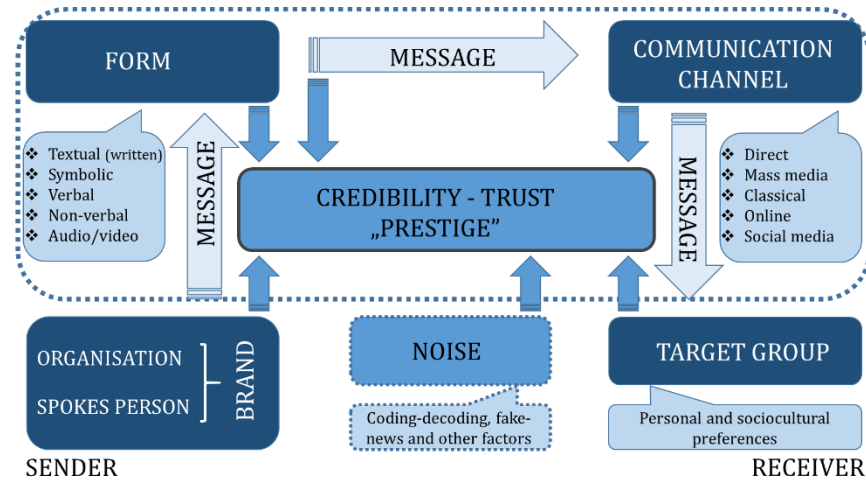
We have to recognize that users are biased and cynical about a source they consider distrustful, regardless of content (Weidner, Beuk and Bal, 2020). In practice, if the person affected by change is distrustful of the new organisational structure and the new foundations, regardless of the energy put into the appropriate channel and brand, the message will still not be trusted. If we examine the relationship between authenticity and channel, we find that user judgment will be the decisive feature and not some of the source-determining characteristics (Gvili and Levy, 2016). The authenticity of a channel is the result of a complex evaluation by consumers, which is based on the informativeness of the channels, their ability to entertain and the inherent negative qualities that confuse the consumer. Credibility is a multidimensional concept in this respect, so several factors need to be considered in its analysis (Elsend, 2006).

In this case, it should be stressed, that we have two separate entities communicating the change, and the credibility of one will have an influence on the other. One is the organisation that is changing, the universities, and the other is the new foundation with its leadership and organisational structure. The process can be more interpreted as a take-over, since one of them, the foundation is in a leadership/ownership position, and the other, the university will be in a subordinated position, thus the universities original trustworthiness can diminish during this process. One study found an alarming amount of misinformation about certain topics in online and social media by analysing Twitter tweets. In some cases, more tweets were misinformation than a set of news aimed at overcoming conspiracies (Bridgman et al. 2020). Fake news can be very diverse, in this case because we are talking about an organizational transformation, it can appear, for example, in the form of rumours caused by uncertainty. All transformations come with uncertainty, so the transformation of universities is no exception.

Considering credibility, a multifactor model can be developed to better understand what effects overall influence trust from a receiver perspective. In summary, the recipient of the message examines which organization and from whom the message came and evaluates the brand and its authenticity. After that, in what form and through which communication channel, they receive it, then compare this with their personal socio-cultural preferences. Based on these, they make their decision of trust, so they accept or reject the message, during a process that is influenced by noise in various forms throughout.

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Figure 2. Multifactor model of message credibility



Source: Own editing based on literature research

4. Model Shift in the higher education system

The basic intention of the Hungarian state is that universities and colleges play a central role in innovation processes, research and development, and strengthen both at corporate and international level. The concept of the university model shift was already formulated in 2016 in the strategy called ‘Degree Change in Higher Education’. There have been a number of positive changes in higher education over the last quarter of century. The training structure has become more accessible, the need for the development of higher education has changed, the employees are receiving higher recognition, and the domestic institutions are becoming more and more involved in the international environment. As the spatial structure of the institutional system covers the whole country, universities today serve as one of the main catalysts for social mobility. The aim is to operate a higher education system that is highly positioned in the international field of education and research and is able to respond to social challenges and fundamentally determine the economic success of Hungary, and whose basic driving force is competition (Fokozatváltás a felsőoktatásban középtávú szakpolitikai stratégia, 2016). If there is no challenge for students and lecturers, the quality of research and the perception of universities may decline. In other words, an increase in standards and an increase in competitiveness will only be achieved if society has greater expectations for the higher education system. This means that we need competition, stricter standards, challenges and, in short, a performance-based higher education. Through a model-shifting structure, universities can be more competitive in adapting to market conditions by adapting training provision to market conditions. Each institution can make their decision about the process of the model shift, the government decides on the implementation of sustainability only after the decision of the senate. This does not mean that the state no longer supports universities, but that it is transforming from the position of a maintainer to a partner.

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The method of financing is based on the Austrian model, i.e. medium-term financing is used. The advantage of the model is that funding is determined by performance indicators and the tasks assigned, so that objectively measurable performance expectations can motivate employees to work more efficiently and with better quality. The amount received for funding can only be used for higher educational purposes, and the Basic Law continues to guarantee the independence of universities. The basic goal of the change of maintainer is to enable a flexible operation, not to change the education and research system. Accordingly, the management of the Universities' educational and research activities will continue to be the responsibility of the Universities' leaders and decision - makers. Under the new rules of operation, a trust fund will be maintained by the university, which will be approved by the state following an audit. The Foundation is a separate legal entity from the University. The principles of the Foundation's operation and its relationship with the university will be regulated by its founding document. The governing body of the Foundation is the Board of Trustees, whose members are assigned during preliminary negotiations (Felsőoktatási modellváltás, 2022).

As a result of the change of maintenance, the universities will become state-owned, non-profit higher educational institutions maintained by the public service trust, they will be the absolute legal successors of the former pre-maintenance universities in all respects thus there will be a complete legal and organisational continuity with regards to the legal status of students and employment of workers. In the case of university employees, the consequence of the model shift is that their status as a civil servant changes and they become employed under the Labor Code. The goal of the state is to facilitate an attractive workplace and a vision for value-creating workers.

The first model-shifting university in Hungary was the Corvinus University of Budapest in 2019, and since then 20 universities have joined the process (Veres, 2021). The following questions may arise: why the new model can be operated more efficiently and how the new model can create a more attractive employer image. This sparked our interest in our research. As the model shift process is still in its infancy, we primarily sought to compare whether these differences exist for the employer brand and value creation in the case of a university in the capital and one in the countryside following the model shift. The universities from the capital chosen were the Budapest Business School and the Corvinus University Budapest, and from the rural side we chose the University of Pécs, and the University of Szeged. All joined the model shift concept in 2021, except the Corvinus University Budapest, which became a private university controlled by a foundation in 2019.

5. Research Methodology

To fully understand the effects that changing organisational structure has on employer branding, we needed to gather primary qualitative data. Between November 2021 and January 2022, we conducted 20 structured personal interviews with full time employees (administrative and academic) at 2 rural and 2 universities in the capital, which included University of Pécs, University of Szeged, Budapest Business School and Corvinus University Budapest. The

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interviews took about one hour and included 10 open ended questions. During the process given the sensitive nature of the topic the anonymity of the interviewees was an important issue.

Two hypotheses were formulated during the research:

1. Firstly, we expect that due to the model shift the employer branding and the employer value of the universities has been changing as well as its assessment by the employees in a negative direction.

2. Secondly, the evaluation of the model shift is essentially different between the universities in the capital and in the countryside.

6. Results

The first couple of questions were directed at the demographic background of the interviewed person. Of them, 12 were female and 8 male, half of them were working in administrative/supporting activity, and the other half were full or part time academics, half of them were employed in the capital, the other half at rural institutes. In general, it is clear that Hungary has an ageing workforce in education, considering that more than half of the interviewed people were over 50 years, and 25% of the them over 55.

Was the employee perception of the university positive or negative before the change, and did it change afterwards? The majority of the interviewed people thought that the overall perception of their university was positive, whether it was a capital or rural university. They consider them to be “a stable, and highly respected workplace” as some of them expressed. The minority who viewed it in a negative way complained about the bureaucratic nature of these public institutions, with high administrative load, and the monotonous nature of work. In regards to the situation after the change, the majority considered it to be relatively the same. Those who thought the model shift brought positive changes in employee perception thought that the more business oriented nature of the foundations will have benefits, while some argue that the political nature of the decision that can be understood as a violation of university autonomy on the one hand and freedom of education and learning on the other hand. In summary, the perception of universities as a work place was positive before the change, and at the moment, the majority of people feel no meaningful and substantial change in it.

We asked, if they know the mission and vision of the university, and in a separate question, if they can recall it. The majority of the interviewed said that they know it but failed to recall it when asked. Those who admitted not knowing it named a few things generally associated with the universities like: continuous development, openness to innovation and digitalisation,

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market oriented, high quality education etc. This in practice means that these organisations in general failed to communicate their mission and vision efficiently internally and more emphasis should be dedicated to this question in the future, especially during the “refreeze” processes.

What are the key competences of your university? Did they change? Some listed competences that were flexible and quick to react to changes, meet real market needs, international cooperation and continuous innovation. Some mentioned high student satisfaction, but that in reality is in line with fulfilling real market needs and only a few stated (typically the rural universities) low dropout rate. When directly being asked about the dropout rate, they talked about it as a systematic problem, generally present in higher education, meaning that we can consider it as an industry specific issue that an individual university can hardly solve on its own and that is why they do not consider it as a real key competence. Since the process is ongoing in practice, the majority of the respondents said that there is no real and visible change in these competences, 4 of them stated that there is a positive change, coming from the professionalization of the field, thus meeting real market needs is more in focus now.

We asked about a line of general employee satisfaction factors:

Wages: There is a uniform standpoint for both rural and capital universities that the new organisational structure brought positive changes in this aspect with higher and growing wages, although this was always one of the most communicated benefits when these processes started. Generally, academics were more satisfied with the direction than those in administrative positions. As for additional benefits, responses were negative, no change is visible.

Workload: The responses were mainly homogeneous, they stated that there is no visible change, although they fear additional and heavier administration in the future, given the higher complexity of universities and a new entity, the foundation above them.

Workplace atmosphere: Generally it has not changed, although it can be described as “impulse poor” and it is an industry specific issue. A reoccurring remark was the general fear of uncertainty, and rumours of changing organisational structure. It should be stressed that not enough attention is paid to those controversial factors that affect negatively the change process, especially rumours and small talk present. Interestingly, this was especially the case for the universities in the capital.

Exciting and varied workplace: According to the interviewees’ this is generally not an applicable concept in institutions of higher education, and they do not see real and practical ways that this could be achieved.

Paid vacation days: The understanding was that there is a slight negative effect that the change has brought, mainly because of the labour code, although there is a general consensus that universities try to adjust this issue. Although all respondents were satisfied with the number

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of vacation days, a few remarks should be mentioned. One, academic workers have more days than those in administration, and furthermore, although teachers have more paid vacation, they have less practical options when it comes to when they wish to use them. According to the law, theoretically they could ask for days off at any time of the year, but in general they have to take them out according to the order of the school year. When there is teaching and classes, an educator normally does not take days off, usually because of the administrative and practical problems with study materials, weakly plans and substitution.

Career and advancement opportunities, support for professional development: No change.

Credibility of the employer: The general consensus was, that at the moment there is no change in the perception of the employer, but this is a sensitive question because of the actual politics, and more than one interviewee mentioned that on one side, the board of trustees in general has business people sitting in it, but these people rarely have connections to the institutions of higher education. Also some of the specific issues of the education sphere cannot be viewed through the eyes of a profit oriented business person, given the laws, regulations, responsibilities towards the accreditation committee or the Ministry of Innovation and Technology.

Was the civil servant status better or the new one and why? Generally they do not see a big change in their employee status, or in contrast to their previous civil servant status, although they do acknowledge that there are some potential negative aspects, e.g. it is easier for the employer to terminate their position, thus the positive effects of jubilees can diminish especially highlighted in rural universities.

Communicating Change: The respondents were overall satisfied with the internal communication practices, the most important sources of information were the official e-mails and newsletters, information available on the home sites of the university and a line of in person meetings and forums held. A returning negative aspect was the wording of the emails and newsletters, as one of the interviewees said: "it is visible from the e-mails that the lawyers who have composed them failed to consult with normal everyday people". Other than that, the information content was okay, it came in a relatively timely fashion. In general, people were more satisfied with the news they got from their direct workplace superiors, than from those in higher leadership positions. This affected the credibility of the information, the closer the person communicating was in rank, or possibly in the same group, the more authentic the information was considered. Two problems should be highlighted, firstly, that the university had limited ways available when considering internal communication channels (e-mail, newsletter, meetings). Secondly, that not enough efforts have been made to stop negative assumptions (gossip and rumours) which were and are plentiful. In fact the latter may be a consequence of the former one, as the lack of clear, in some cases direct communication leads

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to negative assumptions. It also indicates that the employees had no chance to ask direct questions to find reassuring answers.

Following the analysis of the interviews both hypotheses must be rejected. We reject our first hypothesis because, based on the analysis and comparison of the responses, the model shift did not negatively affect the brand and employer value of the university. Our second hypothesis regarding the distribution of responses is also rejected, because the research in the evaluation of the model shift process found no relevant differences between the universities in rural cities and the capital. The change is still in process and has not finished yet. Generally, the employees view their employers favourably, and the organisational change isn't affecting this reputation at the moment. The strongest possibility is seen in professionalization, development of marketable skills and innovation, and the biggest fears include unknown potential changes that come with rearrangement of the organisational structure, and the involvement of politics in higher education. In the case of Hungarian universities, there is a lack of clear communication practices that gives room for hearsay and negative assumptions, which can have a negative impact on the employer brand.

7. Conclusion

In Hungary, a model shift is taking place in higher education. Through a model-shifting structure, universities can be more competitive by adapting training provision to market conditions. The basic goal of the change of maintainer is to enable a flexible operation, while not to change the education and research system. Under the new rules of operation, the university will be maintained by a trust fund, and as a result of the change of maintenance, the universities will become state-owned, non-profit higher educational institutions. This process has an effect on the employer brand of these institutions. The employer brand is a package of material and psychological remuneration that is provided by the employer and can be linked to the company in both value and message. Internal value creation in the workplace is the best way for employees to identify with the organizational vision. In this study, we are focusing on the change of this internal employee value, and not the external communication towards new prospective employees. Based on our results, we assume this will have a positive effect on the employer brand, thus employees will be more motivated and loyal. This brand value can be created and influenced by adequate internal communication practices. It should be stated that there were a line of limitations, given the practice of these institutions in communicating change limiting it to mainly three channels: e-mail, website information and gatherings. We have introduced a multi factor model for credibility and "prestige" in communication, which we examined through primary research. Our research found, in line with the literature review that the employer brand is influenced by a lot of factors, including the atmosphere, working

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conditions, wages and development possibilities. All in all, employees view their institutions favourably, and the employer brand has not changed significantly. However, the different factors change in different directions, for example wages and the possibility to fulfil key competences positively, while the workplace atmosphere and the credibility of the employer became more complex and mixed. In terms of communication practices, employees were altogether satisfied, but from the interviews it is evident that the communication of the change misses a vital piece. This is measured through feedback, and through constant monitoring of employee morale. The employer could handle this by clear, direct and two-way communication.

In line with the results, further research should be directed at the later stage since this change is still ongoing, thus the results may differ. One key area that should be further researched is the key competences, specifically two of them. One that influences customer satisfaction, since in this case it is not clear who the primary customer is (students, or the market, or the funds and the state through its regulatory bodies). And the second is the effect that this market-oriented change will have on student dropout rates, since it is not clear if this is an industry specific issue that a higher, national or supranational entity should influence, or an institutional question that the university should tackle, as an integral part of their long-term sustainable change strategy.

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