

**MKTM003-SPRDL Marketing: Principles and Management**

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**AS2 – Strategic Competitive Advantage In Public Higher  
Educational Institutions**

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## **Executive Summary**

The purpose of this paper is to critically investigate the discourse on sustained competitive advantage (SCA) as it relates to public higher educational institutions (PHEIs) from the perspective of the resource-based view (RBV) of strategy development. While not extensively researched in context, RBV's application to PHEIs' strategic development holds substantial promise (Mahdi, Nassar, and Almsafir, 2018; Bobe and Kober, 2015; De Haan, 2015; Williams, 2014; Bryson, Ackermann, and Eden, 2007; Matthews and Shulman, 2005; Lynch and Baines, 2004). A critical issue for PHEIs seeking SCA over their rivals is to understand how to best align their bundles of human and knowledge resources for the strategic development of the organization's capabilities (Lynch and Baines, 2004).

PHEIs are rich with internal resources: tangible, intangible and organizational. This paper attempts to curate insight from existing academic literature on how PHEIs can identify distinctive competitive resources and unique configurations of those resources in order to build and increase sustained competitive advantage. While prior literature on the application of the RBV to this sector is limited, unfocused and somewhat generic, there remains insight for managers whose objectives are sometimes around public good and other times profitability. While PHEIs have several objectives, reputation has been identified from this analysis as being one of the top assets that PHEIs are seeking as a source SCA due to its value, rarity and inimitable qualities.

PHEIs are confronted with epic challenges related to re-inventing old-school academic operations to fit with the rapidly emerging, dominant market-driven factors of global competition (Cheung and Chan, 2010; Marginson and van der Wende, 2007). This competitive environment continues to pressure PHEIs' senior leadership to address the idea of SCA within the context of higher education (Erickson, 2012; Martin and Lázaro, 2011; Jiang, 2008; Eckel, 2007), and develop strategies to increase it, while at the same time reconciling the paradox of pursuing public good and SCA (Matthews and Shulman, 2005).

## **Introduction**

PHEIs worldwide are faced with increasing competition for the best students, the highest quality staff, top research faculty and funds driven by globalization and deregulation (Hillman, Tandberg, and Gross 2014; Hemsley-Brown, 2012; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006). More than 4.5 million students studied away from their country of citizenship in 2012, and that number is expected to double by 2025 (OECD, 2014). As PHEIs are being transformed into market orientated institutions (perhaps not willingly) they are increasingly required to find new ways to establish SCA in a knowledge-based economy (Cheung and Chan, 2010; Marginson and van der Wende, 2007).

As funding has moved to increased levels of private investment (Longden and Belanger, 2013; Sharrock, 2012), PHEIs are increasingly subject to market forces (Li and Roberts, 2012; Heller and Rogers, 2006;). These shifts are not limited to the English speaking educational markets of Australia, Canada, UK, or the USA, but are also happening in Asia (Li et al., 2012; Mok and Cheung, 2011;), Africa (Johnson and Hirt, 2011), Europe (Minelli, Rebora and Turri,

2012; Santiago and Carvalho, 2012; Wilkesmann and Schmid, 2012), and Latin America (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004). As a result, universities are forced to act more like corporations in competitive markets (Peters, 2013; Carvalho and Santiago, 2010; Abbott and Doucouliagos, 2009). Some countries have reacted more quickly to this shift than others, and not all nations are responding in the same way (Cheung et al., 2010). Australia, the UK and the US have led the way - as one anonymous academic puts it "I thought only the US universities were driven by profit until I moved to the UK" (Anonymous, 2018). The development of management strategies in PHEIs worldwide to cope with competitive market pressures has, therefore, become of critical importance for PHEIs.

The nature of SCA and performance in strategic marketing and strategic management has been well-studied by the academic business community for many decades (Porter, 1980; 1985). Competitive advantage in business can be defined as what makes an organization; its products, services or purchasing experience better than the competition in the minds of the customer. The most prominent, prevailing theoretical perspective (though not the only) on competitiveness and SCA in strategic management literature is the Resource-Based View (RBV) (Barney, 1991; Grant, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984;). RBV will be the focal lens of this report based on the idea that the RBV is most applicable to organizations that are rich with resources and have a developed history.

For resources to significantly contribute to SCA, they need to generate value for stakeholders, be rare and unique to the organization and be difficult to copy (Hooley, Piercy, and Nicoulaud, 2012). The premise of the RBV is that organizations generate SCA through creating

and maintaining bundles of resources uniquely embedded in the organization (Bobe and Kober, 2015). As a bundle, the resources are made heterogeneous, immobile, and imperfectly imitable to competitors (Barney, 1991). There remains limited research on RBV in relation to PHEIs outside of the US and the UK and almost no consideration to the idea in Canadian research.

The purpose of this report is to review theory, research and discourse surrounding resource based competitive advantages through the lens of PHEIs. A review of the current strategy literature has been done on RBV within a PHEI's strategic context, with the goal of understanding which competitive resources PHEIs possess and how those competitive resources can be best leveraged to aid in delivering PHEIs' objectives. A common competitive resource PHEIs seek to build and develop is a strong reputation domestically and internationally. In this 21st century global knowledge-based economy, generating and achieving SCA will be complex, challenging, and a knowledge-based task (Halawi, Aronson, & McCarthy, 2005).

This report hopes to contribute to the understanding of competitive resources, organizational capabilities and the configuration of those within a PHEI context. Discussion and recommendations for senior managers will be outlined in an attempt to support strategic planning and decisions.

## **Literature Review**

The RBV theorizes that organizations acquire, develop and exploit resources to compete (Williams, 2014). Further, RBV suggests that resources need to be valuable, rare, and hard to

imitate in order to contribute to SCA (Barney, 1991). Also, it suggests that resources and capabilities are an essential and inescapable source to gaining SCA, and consequently, higher levels of performance (Battisti and Deakins, 2017; Braganza, Brooks, Nepelski, Ali, and Moro, 2017; Ferreira and Fernandes, 2017). PHEI strategic planning models have been developed (Mashhadi, Mohajeri, and Nayeri, 2008; Richards et al., 2004; Sharrock, 2012) but there is scant research on the application of RBV to PHEIs. Also lacking is research on which competitive resources; tangible, intangible and organizational capabilities are ideal in a particular organizational context and how those resources are best bundled to bring about SCA in public universities and their academic schools/departments (Bobe and Kober, 2015). More focused empirical studies in this area would significantly further the understanding of the RBV applied to the public sector, in particular, PHEIs.

The RBV has been around and studied for over 30 years and was first articulated by Berger Wernerfelt in 1984. It still faces a degree of criticism (Kraaijenbrink, Spender, and Groen, 2009) such that it does not apply well to newer firms or ones with limited resources and some authors are critical of its narrow conceptualization of an organization's competitive advantage. As a result, RBV has been extended over the years to newer and increasingly dynamic theories such as the dynamic capabilities theory or the composition based view. It is generally recognized that organizational context along with its valuable, rare, inimitable capabilities and core competencies rather than static resources alone are what determines competitive advantage (Newbert, 2007). The configuration of resource bundles and their interrelationship are the generators of SCA, and not just the resources and capabilities alone (Plewa, Ho, Conduit and Karpen, 2017). Not all resources have a sustained competitive

advantage potential because different types of resources and configurations can have different levels of competitive effects (Mahdi, Nassar and Almsafir, 2018; Plewa et al., 2017).

The conceptual foundation of the RBV is that the source of SCA and superior performance is derived from resources within the organization (internal factors), rather than on the market structure (external factors - industrial organization view) and position of the firm within the market (Foss, 2011). Hooley, Piercy and Nicoulaud (2012) reconcile the two potentially conflicting theories (internal versus external focus or RBV versus TPS) through the notion of competitive positioning. This offers a definition of how organizations can most successfully compete through utilizing an integrated approach through identifying target markets and the resulting competitive advantage and through serving these markets and at the same time considering which resources and configurations of those resources are best aligned with strategy in order to build a competitive position. In other words, strategy needs to be about both resources and positioning including an exhaustive investigation and audit into current and future stakeholders' needs along with leveraging resource bundling that can facilitate a complete strategic picture (Martin, 2015). A playbook that contains both; where-to-play and how-to-win, is needed. Often PHEIs' "institutional centricity" prevents them from researching, listening and auditing stakeholder groups and needs (Hoover, 2016).

Resources and capabilities leading to SCA can be considered of three types: tangible, intangible and organizational. General studies on PHEIs' resource capabilities that drive SCA are consistent on high-level categorization including: knowledge-based, reputational, innovative and architectural related advantages (Lynch et al., 2004; Kay, 1993). More recent studies focusing on

organizational resources conclude that research, teaching and networking are considered important resource attributes likely to deliver PHEIs competitive advantage (Bobe et al., 2015). In addition, unique knowledge, knowledge management and knowledge and technology transfer have become increasingly relevant competitive resources for PHEIs (Mahdi, Nassar and Almsafir, 2018). However, based on analysis of the literature, a strong positive reputation is seen as the highest concern of PHEIs' management worldwide. (Lomer, Papatsiba, and Naidoo, 2018; Plewa, Ho, Conduit, and Karpen, 2016; Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana, 2007). Research on reputation has shown it to lead to increased organizational performance (Walker, 2010), loyalty (Bartikowski, Walsh, & Beatty, 2011) and profitability (Roberts & Dowling, 2002). For PHEIs, reputation is a key contributor to perceived quality (Veloutsou & Moutinho, 2009), reduces uncertainty for stakeholders (Rindova, Williamson, Petkova, & Sever, 2005) and guides evaluations of key stakeholders, such as students (Hemsley-Brown, 2012).

Common strategies used by PHEIs to build reputation and cope with the increased competition include: merit-based aid to recruit highly desirable students, hiring faculty "stars", investing in expensive tangible amenities, such as residence halls, modernized information technology infrastructure and online learning offerings (Eckel, 2007). Each of these perhaps being replicable over time (as has been seen in Europe) and therefore not sustainable (Eckel 2007).

Of the sources of SCA that PHEIs seek (knowledge-based, reputational, innovative and architectural), reputation can be seen as the most critical for PHEIs desiring to attract globally mobile students. Reputation is a guiding star of competitive resources firstly due to its value,

rarity, and inimitability characteristics (Plewa et al., 2016; Ali, Lynch, Melewar, and Jin, 2014) but also because quality of education cannot be assessed before being experienced (Suomi, Kuoppakangas, Hytti, Hampden-Turner, & Kangaslahti, 2014). In this way, a strong positive reputation serves as a surrogate for university selection (Hemsley-Brown, 2012).

Reputation is the result of a complex combination of interdependent antecedents (Ali, Lynch, Melewar, and Jin, 2014) - “relatively stable, issue-specific aggregate perceptual representation of a company's past actions and future prospects against some standard” (Walker, 2010, p. 370). Different from reputation, corporate image is “an internal picture projected to an external audience” (Walker, 2010, p. 366) and is thus organization-driven. Corporate image refers to what an organization seeks to stand for or what it believes it stands for (i.e. construed image) (Brown, Dacin, Pratt, & Whetten, 2006). Reputation reflects actual stakeholder perceptions (Varadarajan, DeFanti, & Busch, 2006) that are developed over time and thus are more durable, stable and stakeholder-driven than image (Walker, 2010).

Plewa et al.'s (2016) research recently demonstrated the need for PHEI managers to understand not only the impact of single resources but of resource configurations when seeking to achieve a strong, positive reputation. In other words, one resource can be leveraged by the presence of other resources to cause “causal ambiguity, rareness, and intangibility”, that is difficult to imitate (Boyd, Bergh and Ketchen, 2010; p. 603). Reputation is influenced by the students' interconnected academic, relational and physical experiences (Sajtos, Kreis, & Brodie, 2015), which aggregate to varying reputation effects.

Research shows that distinct configurations of student-focused resources lead to high reputation (Plewa et al., 2016). PHEIs do not have to pursue excellence across every resource but can tailor their investment and communication efforts on those resources that can best be leveraged due to inherent strengths (Plewa et al., 2016). These core PHEI conditions include teaching resources like staff and course materials, facilities and admin support, and campus life pertaining to co-curricular activities and industry linkages. High empirical significance was shown to be true with at least two peripheral conditions along with a core condition as a driver of strong, positive reputation (Plewa et al., 2016).

It has been found that building strong PHEI reputation is different for domestic students compared with international ones (Plewa et al., 2016). International students typically don't have the proximity to, or familiarity with, the PHEI brand prior to coming to the institution to study. Therefore, it is more difficult for international students to assess specific intangible PHEI resources, such as core learning environments (Kettle, 2011). Therefore, international students are more concerned with tangible cues in their learning experience to assist them in assessing the quality of the institution. Focusing communications more on the learning support environment and campus life was seen to be significant for international students (Plewa et al., 2016).

Additionally, country of study and stakeholder group have been found to significantly moderate the effect of reputation enhancing (Ali et al., 2014). This finding should caution and inform PHEIs' strategy development with regards to international student recruitment and stakeholder needs. As PHEIs strive to attract international student customers, reputational associations need to be carefully considered depending on the country. Also, different

stakeholder groups do not have a homogenous perception of an institution's reputation (Ali et al., 2014).

There is some evidence that other resources like teaching quality have only limited distinguishing features and may be more easily replicable by other PHEIs over time (Lynch et al., 2004). This has similarly been discussed in relation to tangible resources such as new facilities and technologies (Eckel, 2007). If all PHEIs are attempting to create advantages through the same ways, then it is no longer an advantage.

Other empirical studies of PHEIs and resources have used organizational resource measures that explain specific outcomes like graduation rates (Anstine, 2013) or school rankings (Schlesselman and Coleman, 2013). Anstine (2013) showed that student-faculty ratio, the percentage of faculty that are full time and faculty salaries all contribute to higher graduation rates in universities and colleges. Schlesselman and Coleman (2013) demonstrated that scholarly productivity appears to be the characteristic most associated with US News and World Report rankings. Also, significantly correlated with rankings were student-to-faculty ratio, and age of the institution.

In addition, some reports have used organizational resources to focus on university operating efficiencies in producing student success (Sav, 2013). Research on higher education can also look at how organizations accumulate resources such as gifts to the university (Humphreys and Mondello, 2007) or invest in resources such as hiring faculty (Becker, Greene and Siegfried, 2011), thereby treating resources as a dependent variable. Years in existence

(Schlesselman and Coleman, 2013), are global and indirect indicators of an institution's resource endowments.

Recently (Bobe and Kober, 2014) empirically studied organizational resources and capabilities of PHEIs and demonstrated three main resource areas that have conceivable sustained competitive value: research, teaching and networking. Bobe and Kober, 2014 are the first to develop a framework and instrument to measure the organizational capabilities of schools/departments of public universities. Their study demonstrated perhaps an obvious conclusion that "effective management and coordination of research, teaching, and networking with important stakeholders are keys to success" (Bobe and Kober, 2014. p.345).

Other sources of SCA have emerged from the literature as being critical to the on-going success of PHEIs - knowledge management and knowledge transfer. In our growing knowledge economy acquiring and using knowledge in an effective, impactful way can be seen as the "only way to have a sustainable competitive advantage (SCA) in the marketplace" (Mahdi, Nassar, Almsafir, 2018. p.54). It would seem that in a PHEI context the importance of data, information and knowledge in the delivering of their services to create value for society would be of critical importance - a core capability. However, the challenge is how to convert knowledge-based resources and processes into real sustained competitive advantages (Hafeez, Zhang, & Malak, 2002; Petrick, Scherer, Brodzinski, Quinn, & Ainin, 1999). Again, research is limited here, but Mahdi, Nassar, Almsafir's (2018) study demonstrated that there is a significant relationship between knowledge management processes and SCA in private universities, which can easily generalize to PHEIs. Therefore, knowledge generation, storage, dissemination and application of

that knowledge are resources that should be emphasized as strong drivers of SCA and PHEIs' performance and success.

PHEIs are people focused, and knowledge-based and therefore intangible and organizational resources are of particular interest. Intangible resources such as knowledge are nonlinear entities whereas tangible resources are linear making them more subject to being replicated. Knowledge processes (KP) and management's nonlinearity is one of the most important features of the intangible resources and the intellectual capital which integrates them in an organization (Bratianu, 2011; Bratianu & Vasilache, 2009). One would, therefore, expect that for PHEIs to be successful, they must exploit their knowledge assets (Bolisani & Bratianu, 2017).

Stewart (1997) showed that knowledge management (KM) is a modern-day strategic weapon that is an organization's most precious and powerful resource (Stewart, 1997). Some argue that organizations can probably stay ahead in the competition if they can effectively manage knowledge capital (Hiebeler, 1996). Many empirical studies have consistently proven that KM can be used to attain competitiveness (Holsapple & Singh, 2001).

In summary, research and literature on PHEIs and RBV contributing to SCA and strategic management is fragmented and too broad. Consideration of whether the resources being investigated are valuable, rare and inimitable is mostly overlooked in research to date. As opposed to looking at size and magnitude of a given resource that PHEIs possess it would be recommended to consider the ability of a resource and its dependence on other resources to

achieve SCA. Future research on resources, their attributes and configurations would benefit from a focus on how tangible and intangible resources can be bundled and integrated to form organizational capabilities to generate SCA.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

As already discussed PHEIs are increasingly competing for students, key faculty, funding from a variety of sources and other resources in an increasingly market-driven industry. PHEIs, unlike smaller or newer organizations, possess significant amounts of resources including tangible, intangible and organizational that have been developed over long periods of time.

Managers and leadership in PHEIs need to firstly consider which resources within the university are valuable, rare and hard to copy. In making this decision, consideration should be given to the strengths of current resources and whether the resources in the configuration are imperfectly imitable and able to be exploited to gain SCA (Kozlenkova et al., 2014). It is recommended that managers seek to leverage resources that are aligned with existing strategies or can be executed into new strategies (Plewa et al., 2016).

Not surprisingly, reputation as a valuable, rare and non-substitutable resource remains an important strategic weapon for PHEIs and hardly an easy managerial task because of the multiple stakeholders, sub-branding by schools and facilities (Williams & Omar, 2014). However, an even stronger source of sustained competitive advantage for PHEIs' managers to consider is how core capabilities configurations, rather than single resources alone can serve as reputation

builders. Distinct configurations of student-focused resources already discussed, such as teaching staff quality, course materials, admin support, facilities, campus life and industry linkage have shown to lead to high reputation (Plewa et al., 2017).

As PHEIs develop and implement effective strategies to build reputation and therefore SCA, factors such as complementarity resources need to be considered as enhancing the total value of the resources. Depending on the student stakeholder group - domestic versus international - different strategic considerations need to be made with regards to reputation building. International students and stakeholders possess different attitudes and experiences with a PHEI's reputation. When building an international PHEI reputation, the focus should be centred around learning support and campus life (Plewa et al., 2016).

Knowledge management, knowledge process management and knowledge transfer have emerged from the literature as being significantly strong drivers of SCA in general. KM as a discipline is still in its infancy, especially in the public sector there is very limited specific data on how to leverage it within a PHEI context. (Lavania, 2012). However, PHEIs' management should involve the organization's existing knowledge, how the organization uses this knowledge and the speed in which the organization can learn new knowledge. The ability of PHEIs to manage, develop and transfer knowledge effectively will be a significant SCA now and in the future as these processes represent causal ambiguity, therefore making it difficult for competitors to imitate (Mahdi et al., 2018).

As PHEIs work towards greater understanding of their stakeholder groups and their differing needs, as well as auditing and assessing core resources internally, they will be in a solid position to devise investment and communication strategies to fulfil their on-going aims and objectives.

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