



The Curious Case of Construction of Quality in Nordic Business Schools – The Symbolic Role of Branding

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Abstract


Universities worldwide have increased their competition for the best students and employees. Consequently, business schools are pressured to demonstrate excellence and differentiate themselves through brand building. One essential part of branding is the quality narratives that universities present to the public. We study the presentation of quality in Nordic business schools. Data concerning the presentation and manifestation of quality by the Nordic business schools was collected from 41 business schools' public web pages. We used content analysis to gather 12 quality narratives and interpret them. We identify 12 items applied in the quality narratives by the studied business schools. Our results show homogeneity in communication stemming from the pursuit of legitimacy and conformity to expectations. We demonstrate that the visible manifest content of the quality manifests of Nordic universities functions as artifacts similar to tangible and visual representations, heavily laden with market-oriented neoliberal values. We highlight how Nordic business schools have predominantly adopted a uniform approach to branding in higher education, as the universities align with their institutional settings.


Practical Relevance

- Nordic business schools tend to present their quality using similar attributes to those of business schools worldwide, highlighting their similarity with other institutions. In doing so, Nordic business schools forfeit their intrinsic differentiation point: leveraging the favorable brand of the Nordic countries.
- If Nordic business schools branded themselves in alignment with Nordic values, they could differentiate themselves and thus enhance the recognition and attractiveness of smaller Nordic business schools among potential students and stakeholders by cultivating and maintaining a shared brand identity.
- Through alignment with a shared Nordic brand identity, individual Nordic business schools could strengthen their own brands while simultaneously contributing to the collective strength of Nordic business school brands.

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Introduction

Universities have undergone significant changes in recent decades. Several studies have illustrated the impact of increasing globalization and the proliferation of neo-liberal ideologies, leading to a trend in which universities have become more market-oriented or corporatized, adopting managerial logics and practices (Wedlin, 2008; Kallio, Kallio & Blomberg 2020). There has been a surge in competition for students, professionals, research funding, and revenue (Balmer & Wang 2016; Björkman, Smale, & Kallio, 2022; Frandsen & Huzzard, 2022), leading to increasing university branding activities (e.g., Chapleo, 2011). One contentious issue facing higher education institutions (HEIs) is the perception of students as customers (Modell, 2005; Gebreiter & Hidayah, 2019). Consequently, universities are driven to adopt a customer-oriented approach, as students exhibit consumer-like behaviors, demanding greater “value” from their educational investment (Woodall, Hiller, & Resnick, 2014; Fandsen & Huzzard, 2021). While the degree of marketization varies internationally, the overarching emphasis is on demonstrating enhanced performance, efficiency, and competitiveness (Kallio et al., 2020). Concepts such as “excellence” and “value-for-money” have gained popularity, leading to the implementation of various strategies, including internal auditing, quality assurance, and quality work (Hauptman & Komotar, 2020; Lucander & Christersson, 2020).

In the current climate of escalating globalization and competition, universities are under heightened pressure to demonstrate excellence, differentiate themselves through brand building, and achieve high standing in international rankings and league tables (Chapleo, 2011; Hazelkorn, 2007; Alajoutsijärvi, Juusola & Siltaoja, 2015; 2022; Lozano, Bofarull, Waddock & Prat-i-Pubill, 2020; Brøgger, Degn & Smedegaard Bengtson, 2023). Emphasizing effectiveness and excellence naturally leads to prioritizing quality (Paradeise & Thoenig, 2013). While these developments concern HEIs broadly, this study specifically focuses on business schools, which represent a distinctive category within HEIs. Business schools may operate as integral faculties within comprehensive universities or as standalone institutions. Regardless of structure, they share a strong imperative to perform competitively, build international brands, and acquire prestigious accreditations (Björkman et al., 2022). These characteristics make business schools particularly illustrative for examining how quality is constructed in marketized higher education.

The concept of quality is relative and subject to varying interpretations by different higher education stakeholders, each with their own set of priorities. Moreover, perspectives on quality can vary widely, depending on whom you consult. Therefore, we contend that quality is not an inherent or fixed characteristic but a socially constructed concept (Cidell & Alberts, 2006; Yogevev, 2010). Building on the concept of social construction, Beckert and Musselin (2013) propose that although the quality of goods is often taken for granted, a more detailed examination shows that quality is the result of a highly intricate process. This process entails the collective efforts of producers, consumers, and market intermediaries involved in activities such as judgment, evaluation, categorization, and measurement (Beckert & Musselin, 2013; Yogevev, 2010). Yogevev (2010) refers to this process as the “construction of quality.” It is evident that the construction of quality is vital for the production of goods in general, but it holds particular significance in the realm of higher education, given the sector’s complexity and subtlety compared with manufacturing. In the unique context of higher education, the production and consumption of services, specifically teaching and learning, are inseparable. Education cannot be acquired merely through financial investment. Consequently, HEIs bear a greater obligation not only to equip students for life beyond their studies but also to generate funding (public or private) for their operations. This dual role amplifies the complexity of constructing quality within higher education. From the student's perspective, when considering a higher education service provider, customers seek assurance that the services they receive will meet their needs, as education is a significant investment in personal or professional development (Sudhana et al., 2023).

The construction of quality is particularly critical for business schools that operate in international and mature markets characterized by high mobility in education and careers (Guillotini & Mangematin, 2018; Björkman et al., 2022). Given the intensifying competition for talent, including students, faculty, and collaborators, business schools must effectively signal

their quality to prospective and current stakeholders (Björkman et al., 2022; Rhodes & Pullen, 2023; Frandsen & Huzzard, 2021). Just as deciding to study at or join the faculty of a particular business school represents a significant career move for individuals, establishing collaborations between organizations—whether among HEIs or between HEIs and external partners such as companies—is a substantial investment. Such partnerships require considerable time and human resources, and they may entail substantial financial investment. Given these costs, stakeholders naturally seek assurance of the HEIs' quality, and in this, universities' brands play an important role (e.g., Aula & Tienari, 2011).

The emphasis on quality within HEIs has been particularly prominent in the United States and other Anglo-Saxon countries for several decades, and it has spread to other nations as the global ranking of HEIs has gained significance (cf. Hazelkorn, 2007; Paradeise & Thoenig, 2013). It is also widely recognized that a degree from an elite institution, such as the Ivy League in the United States or the Oxbridge League in the United Kingdom, tends to open doors to more prestigious career opportunities than degrees from “average” HEIs (Pásztor, 2015; Rhodes & Pullen, 2023). While this hierarchical differentiation of HEIs has been the norm for years in some countries and cultural domains, it represents a relatively new phenomenon in others. This latter observation applies to the Nordic countries, where the concept of distinguishing HEIs based on quality, particularly the notion of “high” and “low” quality, is a comparatively recent development. In this study, we delve into the reasons for this in greater detail, as *we aim to explore and analyze the elements that constitute the construction of quality within Nordic business schools.*

Our focus is on the high-quality manifestos displayed on the websites of the business schools, which aim to reassure both external and internal stakeholders of the schools' commitment to excellence. These manifestos can be considered part of university brand communication (see Chapleo, Durán & Díaz, 2011). In the context of business schools, we interpret high-quality manifestos as written communications strategically crafted to affirm the high caliber of their operations to stakeholders.

Higher Education in the Nordic Countries

The Nordic countries, which comprise Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Norway, and Iceland, exhibit a multitude of similarities, ranging from demographic profiles and shared historical events to highly comparable societal structures, cultural values, and environmental characteristics. This makes the Nordic business schools an intriguing case. The Nordic countries share similar societal frameworks, sometimes referred to as “the Nordic way” (see, e.g., Marjanen, Strang & Hilson 2021).

This concept, along with terms such as 'Nordic exceptionalism' (Greve et al. 2020), 'the Third Way' (Giddens 1998), and the 'Social Democratic Regime' (Esping-Andersen 1990), encapsulates the unique values and approaches to organizing life in the Nordic region. It summarizes the core values and approaches to organizing life in the region, characterized by a striving toward harmonious work–life balance, extensive social policies, low corruption levels, trust in and high quality of institutions, and a commitment to values such as democracy, equality, environmental sustainability, and human rights (Elgström and Delputte 2016; Greve et al. 2020; Leitner and Wroblewski 2006).

One of the cornerstones of Nordic countries' success is their provision of high-quality, tuition-free education from primary school to the doctoral level. In Finland, Sweden, and Denmark, public HEIs offer free education to students from the European Union (EU), the European Economic Area (EEA), and Switzerland, as well as to those recognized under EU law as equivalent to domestic citizens. Norway goes further by offering free education to all students, regardless of nationality. In addition, Nordic countries provide financial support, including grants and low- or zero-interest loans. For instance, in Finland, students over 18 who live independently can receive monthly financial aid. While primarily intended for Finnish citizens, similar support is available to students from the EU/EEA, Switzerland, and those with equivalent rights under EU law. Comparable support systems exist across the Nordic region.

In the Nordic region, the quality of HEIs is monitored by government agencies. For example, in Sweden, the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ) evaluates the quality of higher education and research, ensures that HEIs adhere to laws and regulations, and assesses the legitimacy of degree-awarding powers. If the quality of a specific bachelor's or master's program falls short, the institution risks losing its degree-awarding privileges. Consequently, due to this state-regulated quality assurance, HEIs have traditionally not required high-quality manifestos; the ability to grant degrees has inherently signified state-approved quality. Nonetheless, with the intensification of marketization and competition, the pressure for HEIs to distinguish themselves and demonstrate quality has significantly increased (Juusola et al. 2015).

From an external perspective, the countries are often viewed as a single system due to their shared traditions of centralized higher education. However, in recent decades, the global economy has significantly influenced higher education in these countries, shifting its social function from welfare state social engineering to globalized market features (Fägerlind and Strömqvist 2004). This has resulted in an intensification of marketization and competition, and the pressure for HEIs to distinguish themselves and demonstrate quality has increased significantly (Juusola, Kettunen and Alajoutsijärvi 2015). Despite commonalities, each country has taken unique steps in response to these changes.

All Nordic countries have enhanced institutional autonomy in higher education by introducing performance-based funding and evaluation systems. Managerial governance has largely replaced the collegial system. This is especially evident in Denmark, where corporate-like governance has been mandatory since 2003, and in Finland, where the 2010 Government Act changed universities' legal status to independent entities (Ahola et al. 2014). These radical reforms in Denmark and Finland have led to managerialism and leaderism, trends also seen in Norway and Sweden, though to a lesser extent (Geschwind et al. 2019).

Nordic universities have also transformed into more strategic actors, driven by the need for legitimacy among taxpayers and external stakeholders (Geschwind et al. 2019). This shift is evident in the formulation of different strategies and in the pursuit of international accreditations such as EQUIS and AACSB.

While variations across the Nordic countries highlight the distinct approaches each has taken within a shared framework of higher education reform, the reforms themselves share similar aims and rationales. These similarities present an opportunity to discuss the Nordic countries as an intriguing case, exemplifying the Nordic way.

Marketization of higher education and the impact on quality

Marketization of HEIs

Although the concerns about quality and standards in HEIs are not new, the nature of these concerns has shifted as concerns have escalated to the public interest, engaging a variety of stakeholders (Aula & Tienari, 2011; Paradeise & Thoenig, 2013). This heightened focus on quality can be attributed to several factors, such as the rapid increase in student populations and the intensifying competition in the HEI sector, affecting not only student recruitment but also the pursuit of high-caliber faculty and research funding (Lynch & Baines, 2004; Gebreiter & Hidayah, 2019). However, under the influence of neoliberal ideologies, the quality of HEIs has become, above all, a matter of accountability to the state that funds them (Melo et al. 2010; Kallio et al. 2022).

As described by Kallio et al. (2016), from their inception, universities have been shaped by societal forces, navigating between autonomy and external expectations. Historically, religious, cultural, political, and economic factors have influenced their development, leading to convergence across countries at key moments (Rüegg 2004). An increasing trend in higher education is the incorporation of market principles and managerial approaches. While the speed and nature of marketization vary (Krejsler 2006; Czarniawska and Genell 2002), universities now operate in a competitive landscape, striving for students, faculty, and funding (Czarniawska and Genell 2002; Engwall 2007; Kallio et al. 2016). Contemporary policies emphasize universities as drivers of knowledge production, promoting interdisciplinary research and stronger connections with industry (Henkel 2005). This shift, evident in, for example, Finland (Aspara et al. 2014) and Sweden (Styhre and Lind 2010), reframes universities as

entrepreneurial entities, aligning their missions with economic growth in addition to education and research (Kallio et al. 2016).

Market logic also positions universities as service providers, competing based on "use value" forcing the HEIs to balance adherence to global quality standards with efforts to distinguish themselves, leading to branding and reputation management (Chapleo 2010; Kallio et al. 2016). At the same time, academic career structures are evolving to attract and retain top scholars. With marketization comes managerialism, reinforcing administrative authority (Herbert and Tienari 2013; Kallio et al. 2016). Performance indicators now dictate academic work, aligning institutional strategies with global rankings and accreditation frameworks (Ylijoki, 2005; Kallio et al., 2016).

Quality manifestos and HEI branding

Studies have noted how the marketization of higher education has given rise to a growing interest in branding in universities (e.g., Gibbs, 2001; Hemsley-Brown, 2011). In competitive markets, quality is seen as a vital tool for organizations wanting to maintain their current "market share" or secure a competitive advantage. Although subjective factors, such as "reputation" and "image," are important, HEIs are increasingly seeking more objective ways of demonstrating their superior quality relative to their competitors (cf. Lozano et al., 2020). In this context, the notion of "market share," which is the share of total applicants in this case, and rankings have become important performance indicators (see, e.g., Hazelkorn, 2007).

Superiority is related to strategic thinking and the idea of competitive advantage (Lynch & Baines, 2004). Manifesting a competitive edge and establishing a distinct stance within the global educational arena translate into enhanced institutional reputation, an elevated status, and an improved capability to attract top-tier students and esteemed professionals (Willmott, 2003; McDonald & Cam, 2007; Lozano et al., 2020). The high-quality manifestos have thus become taken-for-granted—every HEI wants to appear world-class, despite their background and history. The approach characterized by the excessive use of superlatives in brand building might, in some cases, even exceed the actual performance and the organization's commonly accepted reality. These cases highlight the ethical and moral issues associated with brand building (Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2022).

The marketization of HEIs has significantly influenced the perception of higher education; HEIs are currently perceived less as a public good—a collective resource and responsibility—and more as an individually acquired private commodity (Molesworth et al., 2009; Taylor et al., 2011). This transformation results in students progressively assuming the role of consumers (cf. Modell, 2005; Gebreiter & Hidayah, 2019). As HEIs have become increasingly customer-driven due to marketization, branding has become a strategic tool for university management (Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2022).

Quality manifestos can be seen as an inherent part of university branding. In terms of branding, according to Avramović (2024), there are two predominant perspectives on how universities apply branding strategies and artifacts. The first view is positive and aligns with the traditional definition, in which branding serves as a tool for enhancing a university's competitive edge and reputation through distinctive qualities and clear, effective communication with stakeholders (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009). Branding also reinterprets established academic norms, introduces market principles and managerial approaches into academia, and fosters a competitive environment. Moreover, branding recalibrates the university's role, highlighting knowledge production, teaching, and research excellence. It also reframes the fundamental elements of academic work, making excellence not just a professional responsibility but a means of differentiation (Drori, 2013; Frandsen, 2017).

The second perspective takes a contrary position, suggesting that branding in higher education acts more as a symbol of universities aligning with their institutional settings. Essentially, this view implies that conformity is prioritized over distinctiveness, albeit often inadvertently. It presents a paradox in which branding efforts, ostensibly aimed at cultivating uniqueness, may paradoxically propel universities toward homogeneity that obscures their distinct characteristics. This phenomenon is exemplified by the ubiquitous adoption of generic descriptors, such as "leading," or by mirroring the identical strategies and artifacts of peer

institutions (Kuoppakangas et al., 2020; Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009). Moreover, universities are increasingly imbued with market-oriented neoliberal artifacts manifested in their symbolic elements, including logos, websites, architectural designs, and a variety of visual content. Although this study does not delve into these visual elements, it acknowledges high-quality manifestos as types of artifacts. Branding efforts might, in some cases, become “*rhetorical exercises, in which exaggerated, hyped-up language gives voice to grandiose expressions such as “world leading,” “top ranked,” and “the best.”*” (Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2022, p. 2.; Avramović, 2024)

A wide range of studies have investigated the common approach to promoting brands, namely websites (e.g., Dou and Krishnamurthy 2007; Voorveld, Neijens and Smith 2009). In the HE context, Chapleo, Carrillo Durán and Castillo Díaz (2011) examined the key functional and emotional factors UK universities highlight on their websites. At the time, they noted a change beyond traditional values such as teaching, research, and management, emphasizing the growing importance of innovation and international presence. The study also identified two crucial emotional values—environment and social responsibility—that help universities stand out. These findings suggest that emotional factors, alongside functional ones, were becoming increasingly important for building a strong online brand and gaining a competitive edge.

Seventeen Swedish universities’ websites were examined by Opoku, Hultman and Saheli-Sangari (2008), and the findings suggest that while some universities project a clear and consistent brand personality, others present a brand image that differs from the personality one might initially expect. Meanwhile, some institutions struggle to communicate any distinct personality at all. Based on examining South African business schools’ websites, Opoku, Abratt and Pitt (2006) found that some business schools successfully establish a strong brand personality through clear positioning, often by highlighting unique aspects such as curriculum, teaching style, philosophy, environment, or location. Others do so less effectively, with some failing to convey a distinct brand personality altogether. Opoku, Abratt and Pitt’s study emphasizes the importance of communicating clear and memorable brand personality traits online to better engage audiences and maximize the impact of digital communication.

A more recent study by Zhang, Tan and O’Halloran (2022) shows that three Anglosphere universities combine two different discourses in their online communication: the traditional values of education and research, and a market-oriented, business-like approach. They market themselves to international students by highlighting aspects that are commonly valued—such as student life and services—while also maintaining the image of the university as a place for learning and personal growth.

Alongside excellence, the theme of relevance can be discussed. The traditional responsibilities of universities and other higher education institutions are undergoing transformation, incorporating new roles that do not seamlessly align with existing academic work structures and professional norms (Enders 2007). The increasing emphasis on societal and economic impacts in both teaching and research challenges conventional academic values, which have historically been rooted in cognitive rationality and scholarly excellence. According to Enders (2007), knowledge transfer from universities to industry and other research users, strategic prioritization of technologically promising scientific fields, and efforts to predict research breakthroughs with strong practical applications have become widely recognized trends. A growing focus on *relevance* and strategic research further reinforces these shifts. This especially includes the search for outside funding and research projects funded through competitive funding applications.

With the increased globalization and marketization of the higher education sector, it has also become important for Nordic business schools to demonstrate, among others, their status, high reputation, ranking, and student satisfaction. After introducing our research context and method, we empirically examine how quality is presented by the Nordic business schools.

Research Context and Method

The concept of a business school is broad, with meanings that vary across different countries and academic cultures (Juusola et al., 2015; Lozano et al., 2020). In this study, we have

established four criteria that an HEI must satisfy to be considered a Nordic business school. First, it must provide a comprehensive range of educational programs in business and economics. Second, the institution must engage in active research. Third, it must be officially recognized by the governmental authority overseeing higher education in the particular Nordic country. Finally, the HEI must have the authority to award doctoral degrees. These criteria exclude polytechnics and institutions that offer only executive education.

HEIs meeting these standards fulfill the three core missions expected of a university-level organization in the Nordic countries: education, research, and societal engagement (often referred to as the "third mission") (Bentley and Kyvik 2012; Compagnucci and Spigarelli 2020). We identified 41 business schools in the Nordic countries, and they are all included in our study. These HEIs, along with some of their most prominent quality attributes, are detailed in Appendix 1. The data collection for this study was conducted in January–February 2022, during which we visited and gathered data from the English-language websites of the 41 targeted Nordic business schools. We primarily examined the homepages of the business schools, specifically the quality-related elements mentioned on the front page or within one or two clicks from it. We centered on these front pages because the elements and narratives highlighted at this initial level presumably signify what the business schools deem most important. As the first point of contact for many users, the front page plays a key role in shaping initial impressions and communicating institutional identity. In doing so, we follow existing literature on website branding, such as Drori, Delmestri and Oberg (2017), who conducted a content analysis of the visual self-presentations of universities worldwide on their Internet front pages (see also Delmestri, Oberg and Drori (2013; 2015), and Sataøen (2021), who examined Nordic branding).

Our empirical analysis of the homepage content was conducted in four phases. First, we explored which quality-related elements were deemed crucial by the business schools to the extent that they were given prominence on their homepages. We used content analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004), with the analysis grounded in the factual examination (Krippendorff, 2018) of the factors displayed on the homepages and their link to quality. Second, we identified 12 items for further analysis. These items were selected based on their prominence, recurrence, and rhetorical intensity across the data. Specifically, they represented distinct and strategically emphasized expressions of quality, which appeared central to how the schools articulated their excellence in the manifestos. Their selection was guided by the principles of qualitative content analysis, whereby meaning-bearing units are identified inductively through iterative readings and interpretive judgment (Graneheim and Lundman 2004).

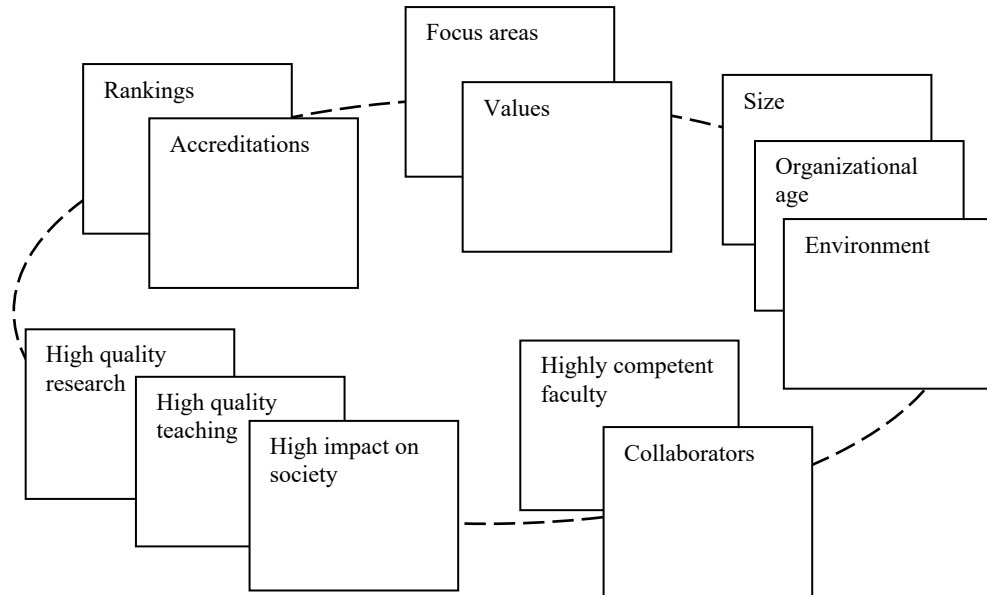
Third, these 12 items were scrutinized in greater detail, and five primary categories, which we call "quality narratives," were further developed. In the second and third phases of our analysis, we continued to adhere to an inductive reasoning approach typical of data-driven research (Krippendorff, 2018). Nonetheless, we shifted the focus from the factual perspective applied in the first phase to the application of a more interpretive approach (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). In the fourth phase of the analysis, we adopted a narrative analysis approach (see, e.g., Boje, 2001) to better understand and depict how the various narrative elements of quality presentation of the five main categories.

Although homepages are primarily aimed at external stakeholders, they also hold significant value for internal stakeholders and can be leveraged for both external and internal branding purposes (Chapleo et al. 2011; Hytti et al. 2015). While the growing body of literature underscores the importance of internal branding in HEIs (e.g., Clark, Chapleo and Suomi 2020), we recognize that public homepages predominantly function as a facade for external stakeholders. While studies have shown that corporate websites are important sources of information for job seekers when deciding whether to apply to a potential employer (Dalvi 2021), it is important to consider the critique that such branding efforts may sometimes lack authenticity and fail to resonate with the actual experiences of employees and other internal stakeholders. For instance, studies have shown that social media platforms and employee reviews play a crucial role in shaping the perceptions of potential employers (Thao et al. 2024; Kissel and Buttgen 2015). This highlights the importance of authentic employee experiences in employer branding.

Empirical Findings: The Nordic Business Schools' High-Quality Manifestos

In this section, we use direct quotations from our dataset to reinforce and illustrate our analysis, as these quotations vividly convey how Nordic business schools deploy various quality narratives to construct an image of high quality. The following sub-sections are constructed based on the five quality narratives, which are illustrated in Figure 1, along with the 12 items.

Figure 1. Identified 12 items used by HEIs in their quality construction



High quality in universities' three core missions

Given that HEIs in the Nordic countries are grounded in three core missions, it is not surprising that the studied business schools also endeavor to develop their image of quality by showcasing their high-quality teaching and research, along with their active collaboration with businesses and society. Thus, Nordic business schools not only underscore their excellence in teaching and research but also highlight their significant impact in fulfilling the universities' societal engagement mission. This can be exemplified by the following excerpt:

We are known for our high quality of education, research, interaction with external stakeholders and our strong focus on internationalization. We are proud that our students, lecturers, and researchers represent a stimulating mix of people from different countries and cultures around the world. Since 2018 we are accredited by AACSB. (Umeå School of Business, Economics and Statistics, Sweden)

Bringing up excellence in the universities' three core missions (i.e., education, research, and societal engagement) represents the most typical way of constructing quality in Nordic business schools. This quality narrative is typically combined with other quality narratives (e.g., accreditation). Accordingly, success in the three core missions is articulated explicitly as stand-alone factors and implicitly as part of other narratives, such as value propositions presented as part of brand communication. Each element is also evident in general descriptions that define the business schools' operations and within specific sections and dropdown menus, such as "for prospective students," "for partners," and "for visitors". The following excerpts exemplify these two types:

We offer education at a high academic level, educating highly qualified graduates to both the private and public sectors. After graduation our candidates are prepared for a variety of interesting job opportunities and we find that our graduates are in demand both regionally and nationally. (This extract from the NTNU Business School's homepage in Norway exemplifies the general narrative approach.)

Reykjavik University Department of Business Administration emphasises excellent teaching, student participation, quality research and good connection with industry. ... All our courses are developed in co-operation with industry leaders in Iceland. The curriculum is delivered by our resident faculty and visiting professors from leading international business schools. (This excerpt from the “Graduate study” subpage of Reykjavik University in Iceland demonstrates the approach on a separate subpage.)

Although scientific publications, particularly high-ranking journals, are highly valued by academic faculty and play a significant role in the international rankings of HEIs (Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2015; 2022; Johnes, 2018; Rhodes & Pullen, 2023), references to publications are markedly underrepresented in the uppermost sections of homepages. Currently, it is common for HEIs to showcase the prestigious journals that their faculty members have published, but this information does not prominently feature on the homepages of the Nordic business schools we studied.

High quality verified by intermediaries

Aside from the three elements consistently present on the studied homepages, namely, high-quality teaching, research, and societal engagement, the homepages of the examined business schools highlight themes in which the respective HEIs particularly excelled in terms of quality. It is not surprising that the aspects in which they do not excel are omitted. For example, rankings are only mentioned by business schools that perform well in them. Similarly, accreditations only feature in the quality narratives of business schools that earned such endorsements and occasionally by those in the process of obtaining them. As a consequence, several business schools take the time to educate homepage visitors about the significance of different accreditations, as the following extract illustrates:

An accreditation process is built on self-evaluation and peer-review. Gaining accreditation is a quality mark testifying that a university, a department/school or educational programme(s) have achieved the level of quality that is defined and sought after by a specific accrediting body. SBS Executive MBA is today accredited by AMBA (The Associations of MBAs; London, UK) and SBS also strives toward being accredited by AACSB (The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business; Tampa, USA). The two accreditation processes have similar components, but with their own specific characteristics. (Stockholm Business School, Sweden)

Interestingly, the Nordic business schools hardly ever mention national accreditations on their homepages, even though their public funding is attached to these accreditations. Instead, HEIs focus almost exclusively on international accreditations, which generally do not affect the public funding of Nordic HEIs.

Unsurprisingly, in addition to accreditations, achieving a high position in rankings is actively leveraged in the construction of quality narratives. Business schools that rank highly are also keen to draw comparisons with other prestigious HEIs, thereby associating themselves with their prestige, as demonstrated by the following extract:

Our faculty and staff are very committed to their work. The academic level of achievement is also reflected in our recent excellent rankings. For example, our field of research in business economics placed 24th in the global Shanghai Ranking in 2020. By way of comparison, Stanford was only three places higher on the same list. (Aalto University School of Business, Finland)

Constructing quality through demographic and environmental strengths

As high rankings and the coveted “triple crown” of accreditations apply only to a few Nordic business schools, the majority of the studied HEIs have to base their quality narratives on other factors. In this regard, the size and high organizational age of an HEI are typically mentioned as quality factors. A recent establishment can also be considered a positive factor if the HEI performs particularly well in its “organizational age cohort,” as shown by the extract from the Örebro University School of Business.

Örebro University School of Business was formed in 1991 as part of Örebro University. After being awarded university status by the Swedish government only in 1999, Örebro University is today one of the world’s 400 top universities according to the Times Higher Education World University Rankings. The School of Business is very proud to be a part of this higher education institution.

Generally, the peripheral geographic location of the Nordic countries in the far north of Europe is not typically viewed as advantageous. In contrast to some Central European business schools that highlight their central location in the heart of Europe or major cities, Nordic business schools adopt a different narrative regarding physical space. Thus, only a relatively few of the studied business schools construct quality narratives around their geographical domain or regional identity (Palmer & Short, 2008). Instead, most of them emphasize high-quality research environments and excellent regional connections in their quality narratives, as demonstrated by the following extract:

We are an internationally competitive, productive and specialised research university with a strong focus on impactful, basic scientific research. We are a highly valued partner within both regional and international innovation ecosystems. The University of Vaasa is located at the heart of Northern Europe's largest energy and environment business cluster. We consider advancing the renewal of the energy sector and combating climate change a core part of our mission. (University of Vaasa, Finland)

Leveraging quality through partnerships and faculty

The theme of active collaboration with businesses and society is a consistent feature in the quality narratives of the studied business schools. These also emphasize the discussion of relevance in HEIs. Many schools also depict the construction of their quality through their partnerships, particularly emphasizing collaborations with companies and other HEIs. While the language used in the partnership narrative is predominantly positive, references to other HEIs are a notable exception, in which the discourse occasionally admits the possibility of lower quality elements:

Quality is more important than quantity in SSE's partner relations and we therefore restrict our Student Exchange Program to some of the world's most renowned business schools as our partner universities. (Stockholm School of Economics, Sweden)

The approach Stockholm School of Economics uses to craft its quality narrative can be called an "exclusive strategy" in quality construction, subtly suggesting, albeit somewhat implicitly, the lower quality of certain other HEIs. This method of quality construction is relatively uncommon among the business schools studied. Nevertheless, it presents a fascinating example that demonstrates how "quantity" can be perceived as a proxy for "low quality" within HEI quality discourses (Kallio, Kallio & Grossi, 2017).

Many Nordic business schools leverage the high competence of their faculty—and sometimes also the administrative staff—in their construction of quality narratives, as illustrated by the following extract:

Our 92 faculty members and administrative staff are highly professional and have a large network of fellow researchers and research institutions both nationally and internationally. For the moment there are 20 doctoral fellows at the UiS Business School. We are closely in contact with the social and business community both in our education and our research. (University of Stavanger Business School, Norway)

Constructing quality through values and focus areas

The two remaining categories, focus areas and values, encompass four key themes: internationality, sustainability, future orientation, and innovation. The following extract from the Linköping University contains three of these four themes:

The Department of Management and Engineering (IEI) strengthens and develops tomorrow's industry, business world and society by ground-breaking research, education and innovation. ... We are a department that sees innovation, development and innovation as fundamentally necessary to strengthen a sustainable society. Collaboration and dialogue permeate our operations, making positive and productive relationships with companies and other organisations possible. This in turn helps to make our students highly sought-after, and ensures that research can be used to increase competitiveness and sustainability. (Linköping University, Sweden)

The analysis indicates that the Nordic business schools may sometimes interpret the four themes differently, so they should not be seen as uniform across institutions. This variation is also observed in sustainability, innovation, and internationality, making it challenging to categorize them definitively as either a focus area or a value. For an ordinary visitor or potential student

browsing the homepages, distinguishing between the business schools in terms of their focus areas and values can be very challenging. This reflects a prevailing logic in the construction of quality: the impression of future orientation that one business school establishes by employing over 20 scholars specializing in Futures Research (Turku School of Economics) can be similarly projected by another school through effective communication tactics, although the branding literature underlines that brand building should be based on a brand's vision and aim and its enduring nature, not anything "cosmetic" (e.g., Kapferer, 2000; Vásquez, Sergi & Cordelier, 2013).

Discussion: The Quality Narratives and the Curious Absence of "The Nordic Way"

Based on the analyses in the previous section, we identify 12 items applied in the quality narratives of Nordic business schools. Although there are some interrelatedness and overlapping among these categories, five quality discourses with distinct logics are obtained. The quality discourses and their logics and special characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of quality discourses

Quality discourse	Items	Prevailing logic	Special characteristic
High quality in universities three core missions	High quality research High quality teaching High impact on society	An organization's high quality is indicated by success in the three core missions expected of all publicly funded and accredited HEIs in the Nordic countries	The most common form of constructing high quality, which is applied by practically all Nordic business schools; typically combined with other quality narratives
High quality verified by intermediaries	Accreditations Rankings	International accreditations and high rankings reflect the high quality of the business school; 'hard facts' that cannot be questioned	The most valued elements of quality construction; applied only by those HEIs holding international accreditation(s) and/or high rankings
Constructing quality via demographic and environmental strengths	Size Organizational age Environment	The large size and long history of a HEI reflect its quality; the peripheral location is not mentioned – instead, emphasis is placed on, e.g., a good research environment	Avoiding addressing the peripheral location of the Nordic countries; often used as a quality narrative by those HEIs that lack accreditations and/or high rankings
Leveraging quality via partnerships and faculty	Collaborators Highly competent faculty	High-caliber academic faculty are indicative of high quality; partnerships with companies and other HEIs signal quality ('The fact that they want to collaborate with us signifies our high quality')	The high quality of faculty and collaborating HEIs is asserted, whereas companies, as collaborators, are generally deemed good without the necessity to actively validate their quality
Constructing quality through values and focus areas	Values Focus areas	Emphasizing four key themes – internationality, sustainability, future-orientation, and innovation – reflects the high quality of the business school	Although the four themes are common to HEIs, based on their websites, it is difficult to determine when the issue is a value and when it is an actual focus area

The five quality discourses are not mutually exclusive, and Nordic business schools use them in tandem. Our analysis shows that rankings and international accreditations are the most salient elements in the quality presentation for the business schools that have achieved accreditations and/or high rankings. This is understandable, considering that accreditations and rankings are determined by external intermediaries rather than by the universities themselves, lending external validation to claims of high quality. Therefore, in terms of accreditations and high rankings, the high quality ascertained by an external party becomes an unquestionable “hard fact.”

Despite the significant influence that rankings and accreditations currently have on the business school sector (Hazelkorn, 2007; Paradeise & Thoenig, 2013; Alajoutsijärvi et al., 2015; Lozano et al., 2020), some scholars have argued that lower-ranking business schools should not feel compelled to confine themselves to rankings (Lozano et al., 2020). This is because rankings tend to be stable over time, and business schools that are already highly ranked possess considerable advantages. Therefore, there is considerable scope for business schools to distinguish themselves beyond the confines of rankings and accreditations should they opt to do so (Paradeise & Thoenig, 2013; Guillotin, 2018; Lozano et al., 2020). From this perspective, the homogeneity of the quality narratives applied by the Nordic business schools and the values and focus areas presented on their websites is quite striking. Internationalization, sustainability, innovation, and future orientation appear to be on the agenda of nearly all the business schools we studied. From a quality construction standpoint, this raises three intriguing points.

First, in terms of branding, Nordic business schools do little to differentiate themselves from each other. Second, as themes of internationalization, sustainability, innovation, and future orientation are common to many business schools in Europe, North America, and other developed regions, Nordic business schools scarcely set themselves apart on the global stage. Third, it is surprising how little, if all, the Nordic business schools have chosen to apply their identity as carriers of Nordic values (“the Nordic Way”) (cf. Marjanen et al., 2021; Greve et al., 2020) in their construction of quality narratives, even though this is precisely what will enable them to stand out from the global mass of business schools (cf. Rhodes & Pullen, 2023).

To summarize, the homepages of the studied business schools reveal a surprising scarcity of explicit references to Nordic culture and values, even though they do contain numerous implicit references to these. Nonetheless, discerning these subtleties requires in-depth knowledge of both the business school sector and Nordic values and culture, making it a task that lies beyond the expertise of a casual homepage visitor.

In terms of the latent content, themes such as societal engagement and contribution to a sustainable future—concepts deeply rooted in Nordic values—are often incorporated into the quality narratives of the business schools studied. This is logical, considering that, in the Nordic context, universities traditionally played a significant role in preserving and co-creating the societies (Välilmaa, 2012; Kallio et al., 2020). The studied business schools following this tenet actually embody the ideal of “the good business school” in the same way Rhodes and Bullen (2023, 1274) define it: “*The good business school, as we conceive of it, is one that is both public and democratic in its purpose, and that serves society by educating citizens and creating knowledge that leads to shared prosperity, social equality and human flourishing.*” Nevertheless, from the perspective of visitors, especially those from outside the Nordic countries, rather than employing cryptic expressions such as “creating values for a sustainable future” (NHH Norwegian School of Economics), it would likely be more effective to clearly define what this phrase actually means.

Finally, the analysis of the latent content helps to understand what the quality manifestos do not contain. Although one of the identified five quality discourses includes highly competent faculty, and many of the studied homepages state that their respective schools have such faculty, in their quality narratives, the business schools seem to rely quite little on this element, especially when compared to many of their international counterparts. This is consistent with the fact that the culture of the Nordic countries favors equality and a low power distance (Hofstede, 2011). Therefore, promoting individual scholars as “stars” (Björkman et al., 2022) and listing their names on public homepages for the purpose of constructing quality seem to be undesirable approaches for most Nordic business schools.

Conclusion

Empirical findings: Conformity over uniqueness in branding Nordic business schools

The HEI systems in the Nordic countries are unique in that they carry and foster the societal values reflected in these countries. The great majority of HEIs are publicly administered and funded, and higher education is available for all citizens for free. A significant number of these HEIs are under public administration and finance, ensuring universally accessible higher education at no cost. These institutions not only mirror the Nordic ethos, including democracy, equality, and human rights, but also actively participate in their evolution and reinforcement.

In analyzing the quality manifestos of 41 Nordic business schools as branding artifacts, it becomes evident that there is surprisingly little emphasis on explicit Nordic uniqueness on their homepages. These schools appear to prioritize demonstrating their standings in global rankings and accreditations rather than emphasizing themes that could differentiate them on an international scale. This approach is aligned with the global trend in business schools, which often focus on rankings, accreditations, and international orientation, thereby diluting their unique regional characteristics. This homogeneity in communication, mirroring both regional peers and global counterparts, stems from the pursuit of legitimacy, as defined by Deephouse and Carter (2005), in which social acceptance is garnered through conformity to establish norms and expectations. This pursuit especially by public entities with a collective mission of public service, presents a paradox in differentiating themselves from other institutions with a similar mission (Wæraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012). While globalization drives competition and excellence, it often conflicts with the internationalization of higher education, which should prioritize inclusive study programs that leverage diverse cultural and experiential knowledge. This approach fosters innovative exploration of various subjects (Fabricius et al., 2017). However, Nordic business schools tend to emphasize conformity over uniqueness and emphasize internationalization as a means to enhance institutional prestige.

Theoretical implications

Our study contributes to the academic literature in two significant ways. First, it demonstrates that the visible manifest content of the quality manifestos of Nordic HEIs functions as artifacts similar to tangible and visual representations, heavily laden with market-oriented neoliberal values. This underscores a paradigm shift in which higher education is increasingly viewed less as a public good and more as a private commodity, leading to competition for the “top” talent based on “Americanized” values, overshadowing traditional Nordic principles (Juusola et al., 2015). Second, the study elucidates the dual nature of branding strategies employed by HEIs, particularly highlighting how Nordic business schools have predominantly adopted a uniform approach. While the first role of branding positively enhances a university’s competitive edge and reputation through distinct qualities and clear communication with stakeholders, the second role views the idea of branding in higher education as a symbol of universities aligning with their institutional settings. The Nordic business schools seem to have adopted the second role. The first role fosters the HEIs’ uniqueness, while the second role drives the HEIs toward a sameness that obscures their distinct characteristics. This is illustrated by the widespread adoption of the “excellence” rhetoric, which is common in business schools globally. Maybe this rhetoric is adopted to compete against other Nordic business schools. However, we suspect that the positive spillover effects of using the Nordic uniqueness would benefit all the institutions.

Practical implications and future research agenda

Our study also has practical implications. First, our findings reveal that by aligning their branding with their global counterparts, Nordic business schools are forfeiting their intrinsic differentiation point: leveraging the favorable brand of Nordic countries could also yield positive spillover effects and synergy for Nordic business schools. Therefore, it would be useful for Nordic business schools to consider whether they could implement their branding under the “Nordicness umbrella” and thus benefit from the positive associations and brand image (e.g., Nordic Cooperation, 2023). Such an approach can not only differentiate these institutions from

non-Nordic business schools but can also bolster the recognition and attractiveness of smaller Nordic business schools among potential students and stakeholders by cultivating and maintaining a shared brand identity (Marjanen et al., 2021).

Second, through alignment with a shared Nordic brand identity, individual Nordic business schools could enhance their own brands while simultaneously contributing to the collective strength of Nordic business school brands. This collaborative approach is anticipated to cultivate mutual brand reinforcement, resulting in increased awareness and a competitive edge for Nordic business schools, particularly when competing against larger and more well-known global counterparts.

The study has implications far outside the Nordic countries. The quality narratives focusing on similarity and “world-class” manifestos echo the fact that within HEIs, branding is a symbol of universities aligning with their institutional settings and a strive for legitimacy in the eyes of other HEIs. This creates a paradox. Business schools’ branding activities show that they strive for homogeneity and choose not to highlight their distinct characteristics, showing that quality narratives serve as an artifact, mirroring and mimicking the values and attributes of peer institutions.

Future studies could study this phenomenon beyond the scope of the countries represented in this study. Exploring the potential for aligning geographically similar business school brands with their intrinsic values and identities would be particularly insightful. What opportunities and strengths do they identify in leveraging local identity for these institutions’ brands beyond the world class quality manifestos?

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Appendix 1. List of Nordic business schools and some of their “quality attributes”

<i>Name</i>	<i>Country</i> ¹	<i>QS</i> ²	<i>THE</i> ³	<i>AACSB</i> ⁴	<i>EQUIS</i> ⁵	<i>AMBA</i> ⁶
Stockholm School of Economics	Sweden *	63			X	
Lund University School of Economics and Management	Sweden	120	75	X	X	X
Department of Business Studies (Uppsala University)	Sweden	201–250	251–300			
Business Administration (Linköping University)	Sweden	251–300	101–125			
School of Business, Economics & Law (University of Gothenburg)	Sweden	301–350	251–300	X	X	X
Karlstad Business School (Karlstad University)	Sweden	501–550	301–400	X		
Umeå School of Business, Economics and Statistics (Umeå University)	Sweden	501–505	401–500	X		
Luleå University of Technology	Sweden					
Örebro University School of Business	Sweden		601+	X		
Jönköping International Business School (Jönköping University)	Sweden *			X	X	
Mid Swedish University	Sweden					
Stockholm Business School (Stockholm University)	Sweden		151–175			X
School of Business and Economics (Linnaeus University)	Sweden					
Mälardalen University	Sweden					
Aalto University School of Business	Finland	71	60	X	X	X
Lappeenranta-Lahti University of Technology LUT	Finland	351–400	151–175			
Turku School of Economics (University of Turku)	Finland	351–400	301–400	X		
Faculty of Management and Business (Tampere University)	Finland	401–450	301–400			
Oulu Business School (University of Oulu)	Finland	501–550	251–300	X		
Hanken School of Economics	Finland			X	X	X
Jyväskylä University School of Business and Economics	Finland		301–400	X		X
Business studies (University of Vaasa)	Finland		201–250			
School of Business and Economics at Åbo Akademi University	Finland		401–500			
UEF Business School (University of Eastern Finland)	Finland		501–600			
Copenhagen Business School	Denmark	15	29	X	X	X

School of Business and Social Sciences (Aarhus University)	Denmark	151–200	176–200	X	X	X
The Faculty of Business and Social Sciences, University of Southern Denmark (SDU)	Denmark	201–250	151–175			
Aalborg University Business School	Denmark	251–250	251–300			
Technical University of Denmark	Denmark	301–350				X
Roskilde University	Denmark		401–500			
BI Norwegian Business School	Norway *	105		X	X	X
NTNU Business School (Norwegian University of Science and Technology)	Norway	301–350	301–400			
NHH Norwegian School of Economics	Norway	451–500			X	X
University of Bergen	Norway	501–550				
School of Business and Law (University of Agder)	Norway			X		
University of Stavanger Business School	Norway		251–300			
The School of Business and Economics (UiT The Arctic University of Norway)	Norway		601+			
Nord University Business School	Norway					
The Inland School of Business and Social Sciences	Norway					
School of Business (Reykjavik University)	Iceland *					X
The School of Business at the University of Iceland	Iceland		501–600			X

1. The asterisk after the country means that the particular business school is private.
2. QS World University Rankings by Subject 2021: Business & Management Studies < <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/university-subject-rankings/2021/business-management-studies> > (retrieved January 2, 2022)
3. World University Rankings 2022 by subject: business and economics < https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2022/subject-ranking/business-and-economics#!/page/0/length/25/sort_by/rank/sort_order/asc/cols/stats > (retrieved January 2, 2022)
4. AACSB-accredited schools: < <https://www.aacsb.edu/accredited> > (retrieved January 2, 2022)
5. EQUIS accredited schools: < <https://www.efmdglobal.org/accreditations/business-schools/equis/equis-accredited-schools/> > (retrieved January 2, 2022)
6. AMBA-accredited business schools < <https://www.associationofmbas.com/business-schools/accreditation/accredited-schools/> > (retrieved January 2, 2022)