

Promotional discourse at internationalised universities: A critical discourse analysis approach



Ana Bocanegra-Valle
University of Cádiz (Spain)
ana.bocanegra@uca.es

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Introduction



Norman Fairclough (1993):

↪ “marketization” of university discourse

Market-oriented institutional discourse

↪ use of corporate-related terms like “corporate identity”, “strategic plans” or “customers/clients”

Fairclough, N. (1993). “Critical discourse analysis and the marketization of public discourse: The universities”. *Discourse and Society*, 4(2): 133-168.

Introduction

International v. Internationalised



- **Internationalised** → “the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society” (European Parliament, 2015: 29)
- **Internationalised universities** → universities that place internationalisation high on their agenda.

Research questions

Research question 1

- What are the key topics or recurrent themes that internationalised universities bring to the fore to project an image of themselves and establish their institutional identity?

Research question 2

- What types of discursive strategies prevail in this institutional discourse so as to appear convincingly reliable and appeal to students for effective enrolment?

Data collection and analysis

- Ten prestigious European universities (*Webometrics Ranking of World Universities*, edition 2017.1.1 Jan 2017)

University of Edinburgh (GB)

VU Amsterdam University (NL)

University of Oslo (NO)

Heidelberg University (DE)

University of Helsinki (FI)

Lund University (SE)

Aarhus University (DK)

University of Bologna (IT)

University of Zurich (CH)

University of Granada (ES)

- “Why study at...?” / “Why choose...?” subsections of university websites (main sections = study / international).



Data collection and analysis

- Critical Discourse Analysis Approach (Fairclough, 1993)
- Qualitative text analysis of university websites.

Texts were scanned for key topics and recurrent themes

Main themes were explored and organised

Further examination for promotional language traits



Findings and discussion

Research question 1: What are the key topics or recurrent themes that internationalised universities bring to the fore to project an image of themselves and establish their institutional identity?

Education

- degrees & PhDs;
- teaching staff of int. repute;
- study grants; tuition fees;
- personal supervision;
- career services;
- etc

Research

- innovation;
- staff = top researchers;
- range of researching areas;
- research achievements with an int. impact;
- centres & campuses of excellence;
- etc

Internationality

- activities against and int. background (e.g. int. cooperation projects, EMI);
- opportunities offered to students (e.g. mobility programmes) ;
- services of an int. scope (e.g. int. relations office)

Prestige

- world rankings;
- age and tradition;
- recognised quality;
- awards received

Social life

- countries & cities; (e.g. clean, safe, multicultural, politically stable)
- campus life (e.g. housing facilities, special event programmes, meal discounts)

Singularity (USPs)

- study programmes;
- quality of staff;
- investment for the future (e.g. employability, startups);
- social responsibility (e.g. fair-trade, healthy food);
- sustainability (e.g. renewable energies, green campus)

Findings and discussion

Research question 2: What types of discursive strategies prevail in this institutional discourse so as to appear convincingly reliable and appeal to students for effective enrolment?

1. Proximity and familiarity



- Personal pronouns
- Instances of conversation-like language
- Testimonials
- Word play (puns, idioms, sayings, puns, catchy phrases, slogans, alliteration and metaphorical language)

Findings and discussion

Research question 2: What types of discursive strategies prevail in this institutional discourse so as to appear convincingly reliable and appeal to students for effective enrolment?

1. Proximity and familiarity: examples

[EX1] ... the main library in Kaisaniemi with its comfy couches and armchairs is frankly so appealing to the students that some even camp outside to get the best places to study! **Haha, well, maybe we are exaggerating just a teeny tiny bit.** (...) Are **you a foodie**, an art lover, a **movie freak or into music? Whatever it is that your heart desires, Helsinki has got you covered!** [Helsinki]

[EX2] Because it is **the oldest and the newest** university [Bologna]

Findings and discussion

Research question 2: What types of discursive strategies prevail in this institutional discourse so as to appear convincingly reliable and appeal to students for effective enrolment?

2. Commitment and trustworthiness



- Figures (data)
- First-person pronouns
- Performative verbs
- Future tense

Findings and discussion

Research question 2: What types of discursive strategies prevail in this institutional discourse so as to appear convincingly reliable and appeal to students for effective enrolment?

2. Commitment and trustworthiness: example

[EX3] We're ranked **13th** in the world's most international universities. Students from **two-thirds** of the world's countries **study here**. **Six months after graduating, 94 per cent** of **our students** are in employment or postgraduate study. **We offer** more than **1,000 international opportunities** worldwide. [Edinburgh]

[EX4] We promise it's going to be **something amazing!** [Helsinki]

[EX5] As a **VU Amsterdam student, you will have** a wide range of facilities at your disposal. **You will have** access to an extensive library. [Amsterdam]

Findings and discussion

Research question 2: What types of discursive strategies prevail in this institutional discourse so as to appear convincingly reliable and appeal to students for effective enrolment?

3. Appeal and attention



- Adjectives and adverbial phrases
- Comparatives and superlatives
- Imperatives
- Questions
- Implicatures
- Repetition and parallelism

Findings and discussion

Research question 2: What types of discursive strategies prevail in this institutional discourse so as to appear convincingly reliable and appeal to students for effective enrolment?

3. Appeal and attention: examples

[EX6] Denmark is widely cited as one of the world's **most liveable** places. It has the world's **highest level** of income equality according to the OECD. Based on the Corruption Transparency Index, Denmark is **the least corrupted country** in the world. [Aarhus]

[EX7] And after graduation? There are lots of opportunities to specialise and come into contact with the world of work. [Bologna]

[EX8] A university **among the international elite** [Aarhus]

Concluding remarks

- Internationalised universities exploit six themes to project an image of themselves and establish their institutional identity (e.g. Edinburgh v Oslo & Helsinki).
- “The ‘product’ on offer is not simply (or perhaps not at all) courses and study programmes – but all the ‘extras’ – that is, an exciting experience coupled with a friendly atmosphere, beautiful surroundings, and campus (support) facilities” (Askehave, 2007: 739)

Concluding remarks

- Internationalised universities employ three broad discursive strategies so as to appear convincingly reliable and appeal to students for effective enrolment.
- Such strategies exhibit linguistic traits that resemble those featuring in advertising: they are persuasive devices, they may appeal to feelings and are aimed at arising readers' impulse to sign up (that is, to “buy the service” that is offered).
- As a consequence, promotional discursive traits have gradually permeated institutional discourse and redefined this genre to become more persuasive, promotional and marketing-oriented.

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