

# *Analysis of Higher Education Institutions Mission Statements*

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**Abstract:** Mission statements prescribe an organization's nature, positioning and future direction, a public image that the organization endeavors to set. There has been an increasing interest among the academia towards how higher education institutions draft their mission statements in which core values are upheld and all stakeholders' concerns are related. This study aims to explore what are most referred aspects of mission statement and how are they related to higher education promises as a whole through content analysis of multiple researches. The result shows that there are significant differences of mission statements narrations due to various cultures, geographic regions, and nations, in spite of common shared core values and distinctive objectives undertaken by higher education everywhere. Besides, some countries and regions weigh certain values and missions of higher education sector over others.

## **1. Introduction**

Mission is central to any organization; it is commonly thought of as a statement of direction, priorities, or guidelines for how an organization should operate (Lang & Lopers-Sweetman, 1991). Currently, mission statements, shown as an institution public image, have increased in prominence as guiding and defining documents. They are believed to be a necessity for accreditation, a guide for strategic planning, and a means of fostering institutional integrity (Morphew & Hartley, 2006). Mission statements are closely linked with, if not congruent to, institutional values, purpose, and goals (Morphew & Hartley, 2006; Woodrow, 2006).

While there is a wide acknowledgment of mission statements among higher education institutions in US, Chinese colleges and universities do not commonly publish their mission statements to the public. A more traditional practice is the combination of institution motto with detailed description of talent training plan. The former is usually consist of a set of four-character idioms, signaling the ethos of the institution. Tsinghua University, a top-tier comprehensive higher education institution in China, has its motto "Self-discipline and Social Commitment" -- two sets of four-character idioms that are originated from the Book of Changes, one of the oldest philosophical classics of China. Talent training plan is another distinctive feature to Chinese higher education institutions. It is a compound synthesis of a disciplinary institution's objectives of talent training with specific curriculum design for a degree acquisition.

In recent years in China, a new wave of educational reform emphasizing on all-round moral,

intellectual, physical, and aesthetic grounding with a hard-working spirit becomes the focus of academia. At tertiary level, educators and researchers are called for concerted endeavor to knit skillfully every and each each and every discipline with components of students' moral development. The new wave of moral education can be dated back to 1995 when Ministry of Education (MoE) put forward the Cultural Quality Education campaign to correspond with 'building world-class universities' initiative by Jiang Zemin administration, with an attempt to broaden students' knowledge beyond their specialization. Two decades later, the 18th National Congress of CPC (2016) stated 'cultivating people with virtue is the fundamental task of education. In 2020, MoE issued guidelines of moral education in HEIs and officially required all institutions to deploy morality cultivation in line with knowledge transmission. As a result, colleges and universities should revise their talent training plan in a certain way to account for the moral and values advancement for the students. Due to the differentiated rhetoric between higher education institutions mission statements across the world, the present research aims to explore what are most referred aspects of mission statement and how are they related to higher education promises as a whole. Furthermore, since there is not a prevailing mission statement available among most Chinese universities, the findings of current study might be applicable when university administrators craft the mission statements by adopting constructive patterns and knitting the themes in a unique way to manifest their identity and to embrace expectations of all stakeholder. Research questions were generalized as follows to direct the current research through meticulous filter prior literature: 1. Are there identified patterns of mission statements rhetorics among HEIs? 2. What are the most shared common values in university mission statements? 3. How universities differ from each other through mission statements narration? 4. What are the determining factors of differentiated mission statements?

## 2. Methodology

Meta-synthesis approach will be adopted to sort out literature in the past decade to respond to aforementioned questions. A meta-synthesis, also referred to as meta-ethnography (Noblit & Hare 1988) and qualitative meta-analysis. It is appropriate when a review aims to integrate qualitative research. The aim of a meta-synthesis is to synthesize qualitative studies on a topic in order to locate key themes, concepts, or theories that provide novel or more powerful explanations for the phenomenon under review (Doyle. 2003).

The current study aims at identifying analysis of mission statement of higher education institutions, *Google Scholar* was used for preliminary literature searching to pin down the overall pattern of peer reviewed articles in the topic area, such as the total number of publication in ten years, geographic features, mission statement analysis towards differentiated levels of higher education. ERIC -- Education Resources Information Center -- Free Resource (Eric) is the other database used since it is considered a well-established one offering open access to resources in education. Only qualitative researches are included because it remains unclear how to deal with mixed method. Only articles published in English are included to avoid ambiguity of language translation when it comes to coding. Only journal articles were included, as most scientific data are published in this form. The first selection of articles served to specify the choice of keywords and databases for the electronic search. To ensure both sensitivity and specificity, a combined approach of thesaurus terms and free-text terms is employed. This technique maximizes the number of potentially relevant articles retrieved and ensures the highest level of rigor (Shaw RL, etc. ,2004). Keywords were established on the basis of literature and for sake of research questions. As each

database has its own thesaurus terms, and as keywords encompasses different meanings in each discipline ( Bassett R, McGibbon E. 2013). The keywords were specific for each one. Three clusters of keywords were used: (i) those that concern the topic of interest (such as mission statements, mission and vision, or mission and strategic plan), (ii) those that concern the participants (universities, higher education institutions, four-year baccalaureate institutions, etc.), and (iii) those that concern qualitative research (such as qualitative research, or content analysis). An example of the final algorithm used (in the Eric Web search) is provided in Table 1.

*Table 1: Searching Terms Algorithm*

Algorithm used in the Eric Web search .
Mission statements OR mission and vision And strategic plan: University OR higher education institutions OR four-year baccalaureate AND top universities AND world Qualitative AND content analysis OR text mining OR focus group

Carefully reading and rereading of each study was followed by line-by-line coding, after which the codes were grouped and categorized into a hierarchical tree structure. Coding “involves comparing themes across articles to match themes from one article with those from another while ensuring that each key theme captured similar themes from different articles” (Lachal, etc. ,2017). A list of descriptive themes very close to the data was constructed by then. For example, the sentence “Regarding quantitative elements, barely none were adopted”(Julián David Cortés-Sánchez, 2018, p592) was highlighted and coded into “uncommon terms”. It is then combined with others in a theme named “patterns perceived in university mission statements”.

### 3. Data analysis and results

The following parts elaborates on stage-by-stage data analysis facilitated by NVivo 12 in light of systematic review strategies. In sequence, justification of similar university mission statements resources, the content analysis combined with other creative qualitative methodologies, insightful findings in response to the research questions were analyzed.

#### 3.1. University Mission Statements Resources and Sifting Criteria

As is shown in table 2, the three articles utilize top university mission statements and relevant documents for content analysis. List of the world highest ranked universities is identified from differentiated database, yet the ranking criteria are not widely different. As a result, all researches are eligible to cover universities across five regions, that is, Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and North America. It is therefore, that the current systematic review is meaningful to present an overall global perspective towards common patterns and unique characteristics embodied in mission statements among higher education institutions.

*Table 2: Preliminary Date Description*

Preliminary Data Collecting				
	Sample Size	Year	Data Resource	Feasible University
A1	227	2017	Mixed document	World University Rankings Data published by the Times Higher Education
A2	248	2016	Mission statements only	Quacquarelli Symonds’ (QS) World University Ranking
A3	201	2016	Mission statements only	World University Rankings Data published by the Times Higher Education

Notes: A1: A content analysis of top-ranked universities’ mission statements from five global regions; A2: Mission statements of universities worldwide -Text mining and visualization; A3: What do mission statements reveal about the values of top universities in the world?

### 3.2. Content Analysis and Data Processing

Content analysis is an overarching term adopted by the three researches, yet there are huge differences in data processing, so that distinctive findings and interpretations are generated (See Table 3). For instance, text parsing in A content analysis of top-ranked universities’ mission statements from five global regions gives rise to such top common terms in a typical university mission statement as “research”, “knowledge”, and “education”, then “a more detailed analysis was conducted to identify significant terms that are relevant to discriminating and differentiating mission statements of the highest ranked universities located across five regions” (Bayrak, 2019, p4). According to the network analysis applied in What do mission statements reveal about the values of top universities in the world?, “Research” and “Educate”, being the dominant keywords in all mission statements, show that research conducting and knowledge transmission are the primary orientation among higher education institutions. In addition, such keywords in the network bring forth notions that specific values or visions are stressed based upon keyword proportion to its frequency. “Educate”, as a result, is subjected to the cluster of “Knowledge”, “Science”, “Create”, “Community”, etc., representing “strong and significant relevance with the fundamental education philosophies of universities”(Breznik, Law, 2018, p1369).

Table 3: Data Processing Showcase

Data Processing	
A1	text parsing → text filtering → text mining → cluster analysis
A2	frequency of terms → ratio of terms
A3	key words identifying → data cleansing → network analysis

### 3.3. Perceived Patterns

A systematic review of the three studies calls attention to common and uncommon terms used in mission statements that reveal values top universities highlight, which was briefly illustrated in table 4. Knowledge takes a leading role among all university mission statements. Yet some prioritize generating knowledge and push forward social and industrial development through research conduct, while others pinpoint prominent educational means as its core value.

Table 4: Mission Statements Terms Analysis

Common Terms		Uncommon Terms		
Knowledge		Curriculum		
Research	Education	Sciences &Tech	Liberal Arts	Comprehensive
Service		Technology		
Internal	External	University Attribute		Technology Advancement
	<u>Status</u>		<u>Profit-Making</u>	

Service is a prevalent element to mission statements. Universities differ from each other by articulating in specific who they endeavor to serve. “Universities have a mission to provide their direct stakeholders, students, with quality education under professional culture and to provide their

staff with opportunities in terms of career and personal development” ((Breznik, Law, 2018, p1369). Students, faculty, and staff are the internal ingredients that some universities speak high of in the mission statements and affirm to provide high quality service for individual headway. Society, apart from students, is seen as stakeholders to higher education. A contribution to societal advancement is categorized as external service that universities blueprint in the mission statements. Every region except for African universities alludes to the term “community” in their mission statements (Bayrak, 2019), indicating universities address the social dimension of higher education and well acknowledge themselves as part of the society. In particular, “diverse community” is adopted frequently in North American universities mission statements, which “may be attributed to the fact that the US population is more diverse than that of any other region”(Bayrak, 2019, p7). It is no wonder that community equity and democratic concerns are innate with higher education missions in North America. Efforts to society and globe ends also gain preference in mission statements, though they are presented in divergent forms with extended meanings. Asian universities refer to leadership and claim to create and cultivate future leaders with promoted social and global responsibility. Similarly, Latin American universities have foci upon “creating the conditions and opportunities that will enable future generations to take over the advancement of knowledge, its transfer and feedback to the growth and development of the country in a global society”(Bayrak, 2019, p7). European universities have more of a global perspective and “striving to be global” become a common jargon in their mission statements. In the USA, many top universities address the importance of “global citizenship” in their mission statements which refer to a variety of multidisciplinary “global citizenship” programs (Aktas et al., 2017). A plausible explanation of “society” and “world” being part of the value dimension stressed in university mission statements is the nowadays trendy internationalization in the higher education industry. The tense competition among higher education institutions not only locally but also globally gives rise to university’s narration in its identity and long-term strategy in a vast perspective.

Status is one of the major observations in Julián’s research, and it’s found that the majority top university surveyed are public ones. Being public or private is mostly presented in the mission statements to prepare intended customers (students and parents) for the school identity, as well as an indication of a comparative advantage with respect of public resources and support. University history, especially those established long ago, is mentioned as a showcase of the school status, a potent brand effect that is popular among organization mission statements. Besides, the adoption of “World” and “Highest” displays strategic targets of universities, specifically to targeted achievements and positioning.

In the meanwhile, a collection and interpretation of uncommon terms offer insights towards some elements that differentiate one university from another through the discourse of mission statements. Curriculum design is not included, especially for comprehensive universities. However, when a given university is taking a lead in specific discipline, like a technology advocated school or liberal arts university, there exists description of cutting-edge disciplinary status and excellence. Technology is a tern used for disparate contexts. Some university speak of it as the school attribute as technology is the central and leading discipline operated within. Some refer to it as connotation of pushing forward social advancement by means of technological development. Quantitative elements are barely detected in university mission statements, so does a reference to profit-making, indicating university conform to social expectations that higher education sector is principally adjudged as human resource investment rather than financial gains.

#### **4. Discussions and Conclusions**



Mission statements represent a tangible proclamation reflecting how organizations see themselves as well as how they want others to view them (Collins and Porras, 1996; Drucker, 1973; Pearce, 1982), and can thus be considered as a symbolic representation of an organization, a prototypical identity narrative (Ran and Duimering, 2007; Marco Seeber etc. 2017). Noticeably, organizations declare their identities “to conform to institutional expectations in their field”(Marco Seeber etc. 2017) in order to avoid social sanction and gain legitimacy( Czarniawska and Wolff 1998; Glynn 2008; Glynn and Abzug 2002; Pedersen and Dobbin 2006). Mission statements contain different dimensions, such as organizational culture and values,while differences can be found in different geographic regions (Babnik et al., 2014; Bayrak, 2019; Aktas et al., 2017;Breznik, Law, 2018 ) There are significant differences of mission statements narrations due to various cultures, geographic regions, and nations, in spite of common shared core values and distinctive objectives undertaken by higher education everywhere. Besides, some countries and regions weigh certain values and missions of higher education sector over others, for instance, Asian universities stress the importance of contributing, serving, and advancing society, corresponding to its well-accepted social norm of putting communal goods ahead of individual gains.

The research is limited to three researches targeting at top universities’ mission statement in the past five years. It would be far-reaching to expand the sample size and see whether a similar picture arises. Similarly, a follow up study might want to focus on mission statements of Chinese universities, to investigate how the structure and core values are narrated among Chinese university mission statements and compare the findings with literature and current study, as university statement analysis is a barely touched topic in China.

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