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THE DISCOURSE OF MISSION STATEMENTS OF SOME SLOVENIAN AND AUSTRIAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Igor Rižnar

University of Primorska, Koper, Slovenia
igor.riznar@upr.si

Armand Faganel

University of Primorska, Koper, Slovenia
armand.faganel@upr.si

Abstract: This article is about the language of mission statements of a sample of Slovenian and Austrian higher education institutions in the field of business and economics. We analysed the content of these statements by using WordSmith tools, a suite of programmes for identifying key words in each text, generating word lists in frequency order, and/or studying certain words in context.

First, we searched the Internet and saved mission statements of all Slovenian and Austrian business and economics higher education institutions (HEIs) that had such a document in English. For our research, we first created two corpuses (one for the Austrian HEIs and one for the Slovenian HEIs) in plain text format. After that we used WordList to create two-word lists and used Concord to see how the most frequently used words in those two lists are used in the context.

We analysed and interpreted the results by highlighting the main characteristics of the discourse used in the sample texts, as well as pinpointing the main differences and similarities.

Keywords: *concordance; HEIs; keywords; mission statement; WordSmith tools; word frequencies.*

1. Introduction

Both mission statements and research – scientific and popular – on mission statements are ubiquitous. Mission statements vary a great deal, and so do research endeavours. As our literature review has shown there are many researchers arguing that a well-articulated mission statement is a valuable tool helping organizations to survive. On the other hand, an increasing number of researchers express doubts about the value of mission statements.

As our literature review has shown there are many researchers arguing that a well-articulated mission statement is a valuable tool helping organizations to

survive. On the other hand, an increasing number of researchers express doubts about the value of mission statements. Indeed, there is a lot of exaggeration and wishful thinking and little understanding of pragmatic and realistic goals and plans to be found in the surveyed higher education institutions' mission statements.

The question of whether mission statements are useful or useless is a complex one; while there are certainly valid criticisms of mission statements (little or no statistically significant correlation between mission statements and financial performance, irrelevant and ineffective in guiding employee's behaviour, disconnected from reality, irrelevant if not backed up by actions, vague and generic, etc.) there are also compelling arguments in favour of them (can provide sense of purpose and direction, can help communicate an organisation's values and aspirations to stakeholders, can enable employees to identify with the organisation, can inspire and motivate employees, etc.).

2. Literature review

The ubiquity of research on mission statements has inevitably led to a great deal of regurgitation with little thorough analysis and comprehension. In the early 80s, John A. Pearce II (1982) stressed that a company mission statement can be a valuable tool for strategic management. Five years later Pearce and David (1987) analysed the role and nature of mission statements and developed eight key components of mission statements. Kotler and Murphy (1981) describe mission as "an invisible hand that guides a college or university's diverse personnel to work independently and yet collectively toward the realization of the organization's goals" (p. 245). Other researchers saw a mission statement as an expression of company's purpose and ambition (Campbell, 1997), argued that effective mission statements should, as the first criterion of acceptability, be capable of being challenged (Ackoff, 1986). In addition, Ackoff (1986) maintained that mission statements should contain measurable goals, differentiate the firm from others, identify the firm's aspirations rather than just its present business(es), be relevant to all stakeholders, and be inspirational. Byars and Neil (1987) argued that a company's stated philosophy and mission are instrumental in establishing the kind of relationship it will have with employees, customers, shareholders, suppliers, government, and the public at large. For Pearce and Robinson (1991) company mission statement is something that sets a firm apart from other firms of its type and identifies the scope of its operations in product and market terms. Bartkus, Glasmann and McAfee (2000) examined what mission statements were, outlined some benefits of mission statements and analysed what's wrong with some of them. A later study carried out by Bartkus, Glasmann and McAfee (2004) showed that many mission statements fall short of meeting the quality criteria suggested by academic literature published previously.

Mission statements of educational institutions have also been a subject of discussion in literature. Davies and Glaister (1996) investigated how mission statements have been introduced by British universities. The authors found out that those formulating them do not consult widely and put little effort into communicating them to the university staff. Morphew and Hartley (2006) examined

university mission statements and concluded that many are simply “a collection of stock phrases that are either excessively vague or unrealistically aspirational or both” (p. 457). The authors concluded that “mission statements may be a way of establishing institutional uniqueness and therefore are a potentially useful tool (2006, p. 460).

In the study by Newson and Hayes (1991) authors concluded that mission statements were “amazingly vague, vapid, evasive, or rhetorical, lacking specificity or clear purpose... full of honourable verbiage signifying nothing” (p. 29). In the article entitled *Mission Possible: Do School Mission Statements Work?* written by Davis et al (2007) authors designed their research to determine if mission statements work but concluded – as many other researchers before them – that more analysis is needed to determine whether their findings generalize to other settings. They could not give a clear answer to the question whether “schools attract students to their mission or do missions provide the focus and standard for organizational activities” (p.109).

Kosmutzky and Krücken (2015) did a thorough research of German university mission statements and concluded that mission statements make it possible for universities to position themselves in niches and competitive groups by emphasizing their differences and similarities to other similar institutions.

According to Morphew and Hartley (2006) it may be wise to develop university or college mission statements “so that those within the organization (students, faculty) and outside (accreditors, Regents, prospective students) see that such a statement exists, in proper form and verbiage” (p. 458).

3. Methods

This section describes the methods used to examine the language of mission statements in two samples of higher education institutions (private and public business and economics higher education institutions in Slovenia and Austria with a mission statement in English published on the Internet at the time of our data collection in 2015 and 2022). We used WordSmith Tools (2008), which is a Windows-based software package primarily used by linguists in the field of corpus linguistics for our analysis. WordSmith Tools was launched in 1996 as 1.0 and is currently running in version 8.0. For our investigation, we used version 5.0. on an Apple Mac computer using dual-boot system Parallels on which Windows 11 were installed and running alongside Mac OS Ventura.

During the first phase of our research, we browsed the Internet to find Slovenian and Austrian higher education institution in the field of business and economics, both public and private, with a mission statement in English. Even though the number of such higher education institutions exceeds 70 for the two countries, we decided to select only those institutions with a mission text in English, which narrowed the selection considerably. The selection process resulted in only 16 Slovenian and 12 Austrian HEIs. Their mission statements were saved in plain text format, which is the format that WordSmith tools 5.0 can handle.

Our two collections of text were similar in size: 2104 words for the Austrian sample (12722 characters) and 1667 words for the Slovenian sample (9839

characters). Individual texts were first analysed by using WordSmith Tools 5.0 WordList and Concord programmes.

WordList is a programme that generates word lists based on one or more plain text files either in alphabetical or frequency order. It is useful when studying the type of vocabulary used, for comparing the frequency of a word in different text files.

Concord is a programme which makes a concordance, i.e., examples of a word or phrase in their context. After the analysis using the WordSmith Tools v. 5.0 software package, the results were compared and thoroughly interpreted.

4. Findings

After the texts have been analysed with WordSmith Tools, only full words, i.e., words with lexical meaning (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs) were selected for further analysis and at the same time function words (prepositions, pronouns, auxiliary words, conjunctions, articles, particles) were deleted from the list.

We found that there were both similarities and considerable differences regarding the choice of words and frequencies in the two samples. Words like *education*, *research* and *quality* take the same position in both samples, albeit with a slightly higher frequency in Austrian HEIs. A look at the first 50 most frequently used words in the Austrian sample (e.g., *applied* N13, *leading* N17, *network* N19, *innovation* N24, *partners* N27, *commitment* N35, *innovative* N39, to name but a few) shows that they do not appear in the Slovenian sample. Some words in the Austrian sample that rank high, are positioned rather low in the Slovenian sample: *teaching* – 8AT-81SI, *learning* – 18AT-118SI, *sustainable* – 21AT-426SI, *academic* – 22AT-158SI, *skills* 31AT-145SI, *employees* – 36AT-102SI, *internationally* – 41AT-115SI, *positions* – 44AT-373SI, *practice* – 45AT-133SI. Frequencies for all these words are also much lower in the Slovenian sample.

The second step of our analysis was even more interesting, as concord enabled more interpretive research. We specified 12 words (business, education, international, knowledge, management, practice, quality, research, students, sustainable and teaching) from our two lists of 50 most frequently used vocabulary items. Concord sought in both text files and displayed collocates of the search words. Listings were saved for later interpretation, some of which are copied below for the sake of getting the idea of what the notion of concord is about. Let us have a closer look at the word research in both sample texts:

N	Concordance
1	on the highest standards of <u>research</u> and education, the S
2	the implementation of study and <u>research</u> programmes; Becoming
3	the EMUNI University is also <u>research</u> , which is one of the
4	students? potential employers. <u>Research</u> activities of the FC
5	modern market economies. We <u>research</u> and develop new
6	oriented education and <u>research</u> in the fields of business
7	independent higher education and <u>research</u> institution in the
8	and cooperation in scientific <u>research</u> activities, ensuring

9 studies. With our work in research and development, the
10 of economics and business research and education.
11 on institution within which we research, educate and advise
12 basis of their own and foreign research achievements,

Figure 1: Concordance of the word *research* in the Slovenian sample of mission statements

N	Concordance
1	organization into a leading <u>research</u> platform in its field
2	stakeholders. Our applied <u>research</u> and development
3	foster independent and original <u>research</u> and bring the benefit
4	benefits of innovation to the <u>research</u> community and the
5	and development / art-based <u>research</u> as well as
6	facilities, innovative applied <u>research</u> , and a smooth
7	the quality of our teaching and <u>research</u> . We encourage and
8	in its application of teaching, <u>research</u> & development
9	intellectual space for excellent <u>research</u> , innovative teaching
10	of knowledge. The School's <u>research</u> centers are the basis
11	o further improve teaching and <u>research</u> quality and campus
12	irrelevant areas. Excellent, <u>research</u> -led teaching is
13	facilities, innovative applied <u>research</u> , and a smooth
14	-oriented organization for <u>research</u> and education on
15	This implies: that our <u>research</u> is internationally
16	practice-oriented education and <u>research</u> . Internationality

Figure 2: Concordance of the word *research* in the Austrian sample of mission statements

There are 12 occurrences of the word *research* in Slovenian sample and 16 occurrences in the Austrian sample. Slovenian institutions tell the reader of the mission statement that their institution offers “the highest standard of research and education”, they “research, educate and advise”, “research and develop new knowledge” and “cooperate in scientific research activities”. On the other hand, Austrian institutions in the field of business and economics offer “applied research”, “foster independent and original research”, stress the “quality of our teaching and research”, represent “intellectual space for excellent research”, want to further improve “teaching and research quality”, or even offer “excellent research-led teaching” and “practice-oriented education and research”.

The word *business* has been used 19 times in Slovenian sample and 25 times in the Austrian sample. In Slovenian sample, the word is mainly used as a part of the name of the institution or when listing different fields of study. In addition, it can be found in the following context: “educate internationally competitive business economists”, and “socially responsible management of business and economic challenges”. In the Austrian sample, institutions of higher learning aim “at

providing state-of-the-art business education”, prepare students for “international business careers”, stress the importance of “responsibility in the world of business and in society as a whole”, help students to “master the challenges of globalized business world”, or help them to “make sense in the business world”, offer “real-life business stimulations”, and may believe they are “a major European business hub”.

The word *education* is used 19 times in the Slovenian sample and 23 times in Austrian sample. In the Slovenian sample it is mainly a part of a word partnership (higher education), which can be preceded by adjectives (quality, independent or world-class). Austrian institutions, on the other hand, emphasize “tailored continuing education courses”, which is sometimes “practice-oriented” and often “excellent education”, “state-of-the-art business education”, “first-class education”, “high quality education”, “renowned further education”.

The word *international* was used six times in the Slovenian sample and 24 times in the Austrian sample of HEIs. In the Slovenian sample, an institution may offer “other relevant services in an international context” or uses the word as a part of its name. In the Austrian sample, the HEI may represent itself as a university “with an international focus”, tell the reader in its mission statement that it meets “international university standards”, prepare a student to become “a senior manager in an international corporation”, emphasize the importance of its “business-relevant and solution-oriented international orientation”. Other institutions stress “strong international network” or “sustainable network with local and international partners”, prepare Bachelor and Master students for “international business careers” so that they may “move around safely and successfully in international business” as “senior managers in international corporations”.

The word *knowledge* is three times more often used by Slovenian HEIs than Austrian (21 vs 7 times). In Slovenian mission statements it appears in the following ways: “offer knowledge in the field of management”, “students, who are gaining knowledge through modern teaching”, “education process, and knowledge transfer”, “Provide additional knowledge in the field of law”, “will ensure the knowledge and skills in the field”, “acquire useful knowledge for subsequent jobs”, “comprehensive, quality and applicable knowledge”, “new entrepreneurial knowledge and skills”, “We research and develop new knowledge, transfer existing knowledge”, “enabling both a process of knowledge co-creation”, “Contribute to the development of knowledge society and prosperity”.

In Austrian mission statements the word *knowledge* is scarcely used: “ensures the required knowledge quality”, “knowledge diversity”, “mobility and permanent innovation of knowledge are fundamental”, “future-oriented application of knowledge” and “developing an international network of knowledge”.

The word *management* was used 27 times in Slovenian mission statements and only eight times in Austrian sample of texts. In Slovenian statements, institutions mainly “offer knowledge in the field of management” (12 times), the word may also be a part of the name of the institution (four times) or may appear in the following context: “competences for socially responsible management of

business and economic” or be a part of the description of areas of study at the institution (five times). In Austrian HEIs the word management is also a part of the institution’s name, or in the context describing “the highest echelons of executive management and entrepreneurial” education.

The word *practice* is rarely used in both samples (only twice in the Slovenian sample and five times in Austrian mission statements). One learns that the aim of a Slovenian institution is to “deliver professional knowledge and practice”, whereas an Austrian institution offers “practice-oriented education”. In addition, Austrian HEIs also encourages their students “to practice hands-on in intensive projects” or simply offer their students “practice-oriented education”.

The word *quality* is used in the following context by Slovenian HEIs: “quality education and training”, “quality educational programmes”, “quality educated personnel”, “comprehensive, quality and applicable knowledge”, “Raising quality of higher education”, “developing quality co-operation with students” and “lectures of the highest quality”.

Austrian counterparts use the word *quality* in a similar, but slightly different context: “with international quality standards”, “continuous improvement in the quality of our teaching and research”, “world-leading quality”, “high-quality infrastructure”, “ensures the required knowledge quality”, “teaching and research quality”, “high quality teaching” and “commits itself to continuous quality improvement”.

The word *skill* was mentioned twice in the Slovenian sample and six times in the Austrian sample of mission statements. Slovenian HEIs “ensure knowledge and skills in the field of management” or “entrepreneurial knowledge and skills in the field of business”. Austrian HEIs use the word in the following contexts: “technical and social skills”, “The hard facts and soft skills” and “professional skills, diversity and sustainability”.

There are 26 occurrences of the word *student* in Austrian mission statements and 10 occurrences in Slovenian mission statements. Slovenian HEIs mention “nourishing a positive identification of students, graduates and employees”, “capable and ambitious students who are gaining knowledge”, or simply “students who acquire knowledge”, “quality co-operation with student’s potential employers”. Austrian HEIs try to attract both “male and female students and students from various cultural backgrounds”, offer “students a sound university education”, try to attract “motivated, ambitious and open-minded students”, while they “actively listen to its students and employees”, and keep in mind “career promotion and placement of students and graduates”.

The word *sustainable* can be found in Slovenian mission statements only once, and seven times in Austrian sample of mission statements. The aim of a Slovenian HEI is to “ensure the sustainable development of society”, whereas Austrian HEIs “make contributions to the sustainable development of society” and believe in the “principle of responsible and sustainable leadership and development”.

Slovenian HEIs rarely mention the word *teaching* in their mission statements (only three times). When they do, they mention “excellent teaching conditions”,

“high-quality teaching” and “gaining knowledge through modern teaching methods”. On the other hand, Austrian HEIs “ensure high quality teaching”, “implement new methods of teaching and learning”, stand for the “freedom of scientific thought and teaching as well as equal opportunity”, cater for “excellence in teaching”, emphasize “depth of knowledge in its application of teaching, research and development”, stress “excellent research-led teaching” and work continuously “to further improve teaching and research quality”.

5. Discussion

Our analysis of mission statements of HEIs in Austria and Slovenia in the field of business and economics revealed several findings worthy of discussion. Before we proceed, let us point out that the present study was based on a small sample, thus findings should be regarded as tentative. Also, our study was limited to a small section of mission statements in private and public higher education institution in economics and business in two European countries, so no conclusions can be drawn regarding the rest of the European education sector.

Future research based on a larger sample would certainly make a useful contribution to the literature on mission statements in higher education institutions. Finding out differences in mission statements of public and private HEIs is another possibility on which future research could focus.

Another limitation of our research lies in the fact that we only included institutions with a mission statement published in English on the Internet, whereas schools with mission statement in German or Slovenian were not included.

As seen from the analysis, academic institutions reveal their key values in different ways. In both countries, words education, research and quality take the same position of the most frequently used words. On the other hand, some words (applied, innovation, commitment) appear only in the Austrian sample, whereas learning, skills, sustainable and practice are positioned much lower and with fewer appearances in the Slovenian sample.

A closer look at the word *research* shows that Slovenian business and economics schools merely offer “education and research in the field of business”, while an Austrian institution may see itself as a “leading research platform”, offering “research-led teaching” or foster “independent and original research”.

Big words can occasionally be found in mission statements of HEIs in both countries. Prospective students can expect “state-of-art business education”, “world class business education”.

Slovenian writers of mission statements seem to like the word knowledge very much as it has been used three times more often than their Austrian counterparts (21:7 times). There is little expressive power in such statements, many of which are so self-evident that they are hardly worth mentioning.

6. Conclusion

Authors of this study believe that their findings have practical implications for those writing or rewriting their mission statements in higher education institutions. We also sincerely hope that our research might be a step towards

demystifying the purpose of mission statements based on numerous prescriptive studies done during the last four decades.

Our recommendations could be summarised as follows: as the demise of mission statements is unlikely to occur any time soon, the creators of such texts should struggle to provide statements of reasonable length, try to avoid big words, vague and vapid goals, cliches, and above all, try not to exaggerate. We believe that many mission statements exist merely because they are expected to exist.

If those in charge of writing mission statements for a school want to save time and resources, consulting a mission statement generator may not be a bad idea, provided they input creative writing prompts. Here is one example generated with Ramp mission statement generator on March 10, 2023:

“At HEIX, our mission is to offer quality, sustainable higher education that gives students the research-based learning experience they need for their careers and life. We work with our stakeholders to identify and address the challenges facing today’s societies, so that together we can create a brighter future for all.”

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