

Universities have reputations whether they like it or not

How we conduct our institutions impacts perception, value and reflects on leadership, one expert writes

👤 Steve Drury • June 25, 2025 Last Updated: June 25, 2025 🕒 3 minutes read



Universities have reputations whether they know it or not. Most of us believe our own PR, but we seldom take the opportunity to pause and ask how others view us.

The Covid-19 pandemic shook us all, and few were immune from its impact; some organisations failed and people and relationships were tested at every level.

Post-recovery, if we can call it that, is dominated by a sentiment of 'put your head down; get the numbers back up and find good people again,' Although this is important, memories are short and we can fall victim to the urgency of what's on our desks at any one moment.

ABC chief business correspondent Ian Verrinder [recently said](#): "When it comes to business, as in life, trust and confidence are paramount."

In an environment of short attention spans and continual disruption, building loyalty and trust can be a challenge.

If you're selling fast fashion or disposable consumer experiences, no one expects them to last, and you're less likely to care about customer or constituent turn-over, but for those of us building a trusted organisation or education community, there's much more at stake, and more to protect.

Among things we consider most central, a robust reputation still heads the list. How we conduct our institutions impacts perception, it affects value and reflects on leadership.

In more adverse scenarios, we see the headlines, the loss of trust in our sector and institutions, reputation put at risk, and good people caught in the fall-out; in many cases, comprehensively unnecessary and avoidable.

Moreover, it can get expensive as these reputations, hard-won over many years, can be at risk overnight. Competence and duty of care assume top of mind when inextricably linked to regulatory reporting, and the expectations of the wider campus community.

There are prudent actions that can be taken to improve and sustain reputational value. These could include:

- Obtaining a competent, independent review of operational standards
- Understanding what peer organisations are doing and claiming: comparisons can be instructive
- Conducting focus groups to tease out issues of relevance, trust and priorities
- Considering social license: it is far from a vague, woke notion. It asks you to consider your position and claim against stakeholder experience or societal expectations, and (in some scenarios) any relevant regulatory regime.

Importantly, you may find out what you didn't know. Tick some of those boxes with due care and you may be in healthier territory – perhaps an improvement in operations, a more robust offering that offers a clear point-of-difference for your institution, or more effective communication and messaging.

Communications firm Edelman developed the [Edelman Trust Barometer](#), a resource that measures trust and helps businesses build reputation.

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Its findings continue to be a primary reference for many institutions and businesses. It may be instructive to ponder where your organisation might sit in such a barometer.

Conducting a reputation review is not rocket-science, but it should be a thoughtful and revealing process. It is an external, independent and non-biased tool to explore points of difference, essential value, stakeholder perceptions and attitudes.

Ultimately, it is an exercise designed to help shape your communications and, perhaps, procedural or operational improvement. Importantly, it is something your school, college or university should not attempt to do for itself!



In the reputation reviews I've led for various organisations, discovering a renewed 'value-position' was a revelation. They had seen themselves in a conservative, traditional service-provider role; however the enquiry demonstrated that key stakeholders saw them as 'vital partners' in shaping future organisational outcomes.

This in turn influenced their view of themselves and their perception of their own service-offering. Suddenly relationship, experience and consistent

quality output had a demonstrated value. Reputation built with commitment over years was tangible in the eyes of stakeholders.

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