High Educ (2010) 59:749–764
DOI 10.1007/s10734-009-9278-x

Universities and the mobilization of claims of excellence for competitive advantage

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Published online: 27 September 2009

Abstract This study discusses the phenomenon of making claims of excellence by universities, which we interpret as a response, inter alia, to the hitherto unfamiliar context of scarce and diminishing resources. The main objective is to understand how claims of excellence are mobilised by higher education institutions to achieve "competitive advantage". The paper argues that most claims of excellence do not derive from evidence and are a misrepresentation of reality geared at attracting resources. It is further argued that by making claims of excellence universities take advantage of the experiential nature of their goods and services, and the phenomenon of information asymmetry. Those targeted by these claims only discover the true excellence of the university's goods and services after consuming them and of course, providing resources.

Keywords Claims of excellence · Competition · Higher education · Kenya · Mozambique · Resources · Universities

Introduction

Universities, like other organisations, require a wide range of resources in order to 'survive' and successfully prosecute their cherished missions. Such resources include students, funding, teachers, researchers, and prestige. Given the importance of these resources to universities' survival and success, maintaining their steady flow is a task universities continuously undertake in competition with each other. Competition is not something universities choose to be in; it is a feature of the new context of higher education globally (Stabile 2007). This new context is characterised, in the main, by scarcity of resources and

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the presence of multiple and a variety of higher education suppliers, public and private, for profit and not for profit, distance and contact institutions.

Financial resources are arguably the most important for the 'survival' of universities. Unfortunately, most universities globally, especially publicly funded ones, have been experiencing a worsening of their financial condition (Johnstone 2006; Wangenge-Ouma 2008a, b; Marginson and Considine 2000; Sporn 1999; Slaughter and Leslie 1997). For instance, in Uganda, between 1998 and 2003, an average of 10% of the total education budget went to the higher education sub-sector compared to the early nineties when 19% of total recurrent education budget went to higher education (Carroll 2006). OECD (2004) reports that in England, higher education funding per student reduced by 36% in real terms between 1989 and 1997, and the planned funding for 2003–2004 was 33% below the 1989 level in real terms. In South Africa, as a percentage of GDP, state funding of higher education declined from 0.82% in 1996 to 0.67% in 2006 (Wangenge-Ouma and Cloete 2008).

The literature shows various strategies that universities have implemented to generate resources. These strategies include tuition fee increases, as it regularly happens in South Africa (Wangenge-Ouma 2008c; Wangenge-Ouma and Cloete 2008); commercialisation of intellectual products, especially by universities with high concentrations of advanced scientific capital in mature economies (Slaughter and Leslie 1997; Clark 1998), and dual track systems of tuition fees now common in East Africa, and other countries such as Australia, India, and Russia.

A strategy that almost all universities utilise for competitive advantage to attract the various resources, but which is seldom mentioned in the literature, is the mobilization of claims of excellence in research, teaching, community or public service, and institutional management. This strategy is the focus of this paper. Especially through publicity materials, programme advertisements and speeches, universities not unlike businesses, have tended to promiscuously engage in self-praising, targeted at prospective students, parents, government, funding organizations, alumni, business and industry.

Our main argument is that claims of excellence by higher education institutions particularly in the context of marketisation constitute a response to the new competitive environment. That is, the claims of excellence made by universities are not just mere rhetoric but advertorial strategies for resource acquisition and accumulation, viz. students, talented researchers, funding, prestige, and legitimacy. The claims of excellence vis-à-vis their intended purposes manifest in two main forms: in explicit ways as in advertisements and publicity materials—where, for instance, universities self praise then urge students to enrol in their programmes; and in less explicit ways where universities make claims to excellence, especially in speeches by university officials, and in university literature. In the latter form universities usually do not directly exhort intended audiences to enrol or provide resources. The claims made in this case could be described as legitimacy seeking, the subtext of which is to attract resources.

The notion of excellence

It is a truism to say that whereas efficiency was the keyword of the 1980s; quality the keystone of the 1990s (Green 1994); 'excellence' is the milestone of the beginning of the twentyfirst century. Excellence in higher education emerges, in most writings, as something that should be cultivated, a desirable goal that should be pursued by institutions of higher learning (Ruben 2003; Woodard and Duncan 2000).

However, it is also acknowledged that higher education today is a complex, demanding, and competitive reality. Its constituents—students, administrators, faculty, and various publics—are drawn from diverse sectors of society. Its arena comprises institutions that receive decreased funding, are hounded with increased demands for accountability, and experience declining public support, recognition, and appreciation. Higher education institutions (HEIs) thus face some serious challenges and dilemmas to pursue or maintain excellence and simultaneously balance it with other imperatives such as broadening access, equity and transformation.

Three important questions arise regarding the notion of excellence. These are: what is excellence? Excellence for what? And excellence in what? Is it excellence in scholarship; teaching and learning; research and development; management processes; engagement with the community? As Brent (2004) acknowledges, perhaps the most fundamental and pervasive challenge confronting higher education is the way we conceive excellence, and the vision which we aspire as a consequence. How we conceive excellence has fundamental implications for illuminating and reconciling differences in perspective and priorities. In this regard, Barrow (1996) would talk of '*selective excellence*'. For instance, in the context of American higher education, that would mean 'a strategy to rationalise the system by further differentiating the missions of individual institutions, eliminating programs that do not support that mission, and by shifting research activities into interdisciplinary applied research centres' (Barrow 1996, p. 447). Generally, excellence is conceived according to certain visions, missions, principles, and goals of the higher education system in a particular context.

Our understanding of excellence is more sociological and it aims to dissociate itself from the "one-size" fits all approach of excellence developed in the field of organizational management by Peters and Waterman (1982). Often the one-size fits all approach ignores the social context of production and the relational feature of the claims which we try to highlight in this study.

The quest and claims of being excellent are widespread in today's higher Education. Two factors are important in accounting for the widespread quest and claims of being excellent. Excellence in teaching and research is a crucial ingredient for promoting and supporting both national and regional economic development in terms of highly qualified skills, new knowledge, leadership, and innovation. On the other hand, 'excellence' is seen as a key resource for HEIs to advance and survive in competitive environments in terms of gains from knowledge transfer, patents, enrolments, prestige in the scientific community, and in the public at large. Perhaps because of the numerous gains associated with being 'excellent', some HEIs have resorted to making claims of being excellent, inter alia, to attract critical resources.

The next section provides some theoretical perspectives, which we utilise to engage with the phenomenon of mobilising claims of excellence by universities to achieve competitive advantage.

Theoretical perspectives: doing things with words

First, we draw from John. L. Austin's seminal work, '*How to Do Things with Words*'. In a series of William James lectures at Harvard University back in 1955, Austin drew a sequence of careful distinctions between ways in which language functions in ordinary *speech acts*. Essentially, he pointed out that *performative utterances* such as *promising*, *pledging* or *vowing*, accomplish their purposes without implying any referential

representation of reality. He argued that the function of language was not only that of describing reality. In doing so, Austin questioned the predominant ideas of philosophers such as Frege, Carnap and Bertrand Russel who claimed "that the business of a 'statement' can only be to 'describe' some state of affairs, or to 'state some fact', which it must do either truly or falsely" (Austin 1978, p. 1). These philosophers defended the thesis that language was the privileged storehouse of the true nature of reality. Thus, by studying the language, they argued, it was possible to discover the constitutive elements of reality. In contrast to this common view, Austin (1978) argued that truth-evaluable sentences form only a small part of the variety of utterances. After introducing several kinds of sentences, which he assumed, were indeed not truth-evaluable, he turned in particular to one of these kinds of sentences, which he considered performative utterances characterized by two main features:

- First, to utter one of these sentences is not just to "say" something, but rather to perform a certain kind of action.
- Second, these sentences are not true or false; rather, when something goes wrong in connection with the utterance then the utterance is, as he argues, "infelicitous" or "unhappy" (Austin 1978, p. 14).

Central to Austin's work is the distinction between 'locutions' (roughly uttering a sentence with a meaning), 'illocutionary acts' (which perform acts in the saying of the utterance) and 'perlocutionary acts' (which perform acts by the saying of the utterance):

> We first distinguish a group of things we do in saying something, which together we summed up by saying we perform a '*locutionary act*' which is roughly equivalent to uttering a certain sentence with a certain sense and reference, which again is roughly equivalent to 'meaning' in traditional sense. Second, we said that we also perform '*illocutionary acts*' such as informing, ordering, warning, undertaking i.e. utterances which have certain (conventional) force. Thirdly, we may also perform '*perlocutionary acts*': what we bring about or achieve by saying something, such as convincing, persuading, deterring, and even, say, surprising or misleading (Austin 1978, p. 110–116, Lecture IX).

The distinction above represents three levels of action. Austin suggests different senses or dimensions of the '*use of a sentence*' or of the '*use of language*'. An expression of an attitude constitutes an action. An observation reveals a belief; a request (order) expresses a desire and apology or regret. Austin named these words, which do things, *speech acts*. He distinguished *speech acts with a communicative function* from those, which affect the institutional state of things. The former operate in two different ways. Firstly, they can define the state of something as when the vice chancellor of University X, for instance, says that his university is the first higher education institution to be established in country Y. Secondly, they can determine a new situation such as when the very same vice chancellor claims that University X has a proud tradition of leadership in academic excellence in country Z. There are various other distinctions introduced by Austin. However, in this paper we are interested in one which is most important for our analysis of the *claims of excellence* by higher education institutions, that is, perlocutionary acts.

The idea is that when we talk, we are not simply talking, but we are doing things as well by the simple fact that we are talking. In other words, we (intend to) produce some effect. For instance, when the vice chancellor of University X says "*University X, the first and oldest higher education institution established in the country, this year will not provide places for all prospective candidates*" he is not just talking. The vice chancellor is

presumably doing two other things. On the one hand, he is informing all stakeholders interested in University X's position on the matter, and possibly warning prospective students about the need to study hard if they want to be admitted into the institution. This is the *illocutionaty (act)* level of his discursive action. On the other hand, and this is the *perlocutionary (act)* level, he associates to what he has just stated a certain effect on the audience, namely that they should study hard if they wish to be admitted in his 'prestigious' institution or be ready to considerer other (less attractive) options. We cannot exclude, of course, the possibility of him not knowing what he is talking about. Even though, his utterances may still have 'real' effects.

The relevance of this approach in the analysis of claims of excellence in higher education is twofold:

- First, speech acts can only make sense when associated with an intention (purpose) which must be interpreted in a corresponding manner. Words, let us say, claims of excellence, for instance, do not have an essential meaning. Their meanings depend on the context, who states and who listens to such claims. Thus, claims of excellence represent a relational reality in view of the various actors in the field of higher education.
- Speech acts and their communicative function can only occur in a relational context. This introduces a sociological dimension to the discussion. We understand the claims of excellence as speech acts, within a communicative function, that takes place in the field of higher education. With the increase in the number of higher education suppliers vis-à-vis scarce resources, many universities are faced with the challenge of surviving in a competitive environment hitherto unfamiliar.

As we intend to illustrate in this study, most claims of excellence are discursively mobilized in an advertorial manner as promises, pledges and vows to, inter alia, 'secure' a brighter future for those prospective students who make the 'wise' choice of joining the self-praising institution. An utterance such as: 'We train with quality today the quality professionals of tomorrow' performs an action in the very saying of it. It is, as we understand it, an action of vowing and urging—in other words, 'You choose to study with us; we promise you a brighter future'.

Choosing a university to pursue a higher education degree, in a context characterized by the entrance of new suppliers, is increasingly becoming a matter of taking risks. The context, in which there were just a few elite universities, or one national university in most African countries, is long gone. Prospective students have to choose one among a pool of public and private, old and new providers. As Van Vught (2007) signalled, there is always what economists call 'asymmetry of information' when it comes to educational products. Students do not know before they undertake a course or enrol in a programme what they are going to get. What lecturers, tutors, books, and learning facilities and so on they are going to get. Van Vught expounds:

> The products and services that higher education institutions offer are 'experience goods' (Dill 2003, quoted in Van Vught): the clients of universities are only able to judge the relevance and the quality of the outputs of higher education, when they are able to experience them. Students can only really judge the quality of a course when they take it; and research clients can only really judge the quality of a research project when they are offered the results. When confronted with the question to take a decision in favour of a certain product or service of an institution for higher

> education, clients (including potential students) are hampered with the well-known market failure of imperfect information (2007, p.15).

As a consequence of that:

> Higher education institutions, on their part, are enticed by these conditions to represent themselves in the best possible ways. They underline their self-acclaimed qualities hoping that by emphasizing these, they will be able to convince their clients of their attractiveness (Van Vught 2007, p.15).

While Van Vught's analysis of the imperfect nature of the higher education market refers to the classic notion of the invisible hand, we rather talk in terms of risk taking when it comes to procurement of educational products. So far, the implication of this is twofold. On the one hand, we have suppliers of higher education services who are competing for the same resources, viz. students, research funds, donations, and talented academics. This feature of universities as competitors is well captured in the words of Thorstein Veblen (1918, quoted in Bok 2003, p. 1):

> It is one of the unwritten and commonly unspoken commonplaces lying at the root of modern academic policy that the various universities are competitors for traffic of merchantable instruction in much the same fashion as rival establishments in retail trade compete for custom.

On the other hand, we have customers on the demand side of the higher education market. The customers, as in any other business, can only rely on their usually imperfect information to assess the risks they take when they buy educational products.

The second approach in this study is sociological. We draw on Bourdieu's keystone concept of field and capital. Field being "simultaneously a social space of conflict and competition in which participants vie to establish monopoly over species of capital effective in it—and the power to decree the hierarchy and 'conversion rates' between all forms of authorities in the field of power (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 17–18, Langa 2006). Capital, on the other hand, is the "sum of resources, actual or virtual, that accrues to an individual, institution or group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationship of mutual acquaintance and recognition (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 17–18).

Using this approach allowed us to understand the emergent of claims of excellence by universities in advertorial fashion as a feature, which resulted from the dynamics and changes in the field of higher education. These dynamics and changes are marked by ongoing competition circumscribed by the combined process of privatisation and commercialisation (Mamdani 2007; Wangenge-Ouma 2008b).

Departing from Bourdieu's concept of field and capital, we view claims of excellence by HEIs, not just as description of a state of affairs, but as a relational feature of a social space marked by a competition for capital (scarce assets), e.g. cultural capital (highly skilled academics); economic capital (funding); political and symbolic capital, prestige and power). As universities are defined by their relational position within the field of higher education institutions on the basis of the distribution of capitals, we can no longer regard them as isolated atomistic institutions. The position they occupy is relational in a space of capitals, which confers on the institutions symbolic and material resources (power, prestige, status, money and so forth) (Langa 2006).

The implication of this for our analysis is that the claims of excellence can only be understood in a relational context. This means that the claims are not realised just to

describe a state of affairs but rather to mark a position in the field which represents a range of expectations from the public. Most claims of excellence, we argue, rely on tacit assumptions which, not uncommonly, are supported by weak evidence but geared at generating strong convictions in the targeted audiences.

In the following section, we utilise Kenyan and Mozambican universities to illustrate the phenomenon of mobilising claims of excellence. First, the field of higher education in Kenya and Mozambique is briefly mapped, followed by illustrations of some claims of excellence by universities in the two countries. We then attempt an interpretation of these claims using the theoretical perspectives provided.

Higher education in Kenya and Mozambique

Kenya

The field of higher education in Kenya is characterised by two main features, viz. diminishing capitation especially for public universities, and an increase in both the number and variety of providers. With only one public university in 1970, the country now has seven public, and about 21 private universities. Several foreign universities also ply their trade in Kenya through offshore campuses or in partnership with local, mostly non university institutions. The field of higher education in Kenya is therefore quickly becoming a congested one.

Other than plummeting state financial support for public universities, Kenya's higher education is also generally characterised by limited differentiation. Partly as an attempt to broaden their share of the higher education market, Kenya's public universities, offer a wide range of almost similar programmes, in some cases, beyond their core areas of strength (Wangenge-Ouma 2008a). Private universities generally offer a small range of the so-called market driven programmes.

As already alluded to, financial stress, arising mainly from plummeting public funding, is one of the critical challenges facing Kenya's public universities. From 1996 to 2000 higher education funding as a percentage of GDP averaged 0.94% and reduced in the period 2001–2005 when it averaged 0.74%. For many years, most of Kenya's public universities have been in a state of financial emergency, posting huge deficits and a negative working capital. The Auditor-General has previously described several of the public universities as being technically insolvent, and their financial positions as precarious (Wangenge-Ouma 2008a, b). The context of competition and declining state financial support, obviously calls for some kind of response, one of which is the mobilisation of claims of excellence.

Mozambique

The field of higher education in Mozambique is presently characterized by vibrant and ongoing changes. As in Kenya's case, two main features typify the emergent new scenario. On the one hand, Mozambique's higher education is experiencing a dynamic expansion and diversification of institutions of higher learning (Beverwijk 2005; Langa 2006). From one institution in 1962, the country now has more than 14 public and 15 private HEIs. Other than the growth in the number of HEIs, the growth in enrolments has also been fairly substantial: from less than 5,000 students in 1989 to more than 20,000 students in 2004 (MEC 2000).

State funding for higher education in Mozambique can best be described as inadequate and unreliable. Mário et al. (2003) indicate that in 2000 government planned to reduce the HEIs' share of the total education budget to 14.2%, down from 24% in 1999. Beyond 2000, however, it planned to raise the share of the education budget allocated to HEIs, rising from 22.8% in 2001 to 25% for the next 2 years, and then dropping slightly to 24% in 2004. Another indication of the inadequate funding for Mozambique's public higher education is some of the institutions' over-reliance on donor funding. For instance, University of Eduardo Mondlane, the largest in the country, relies on donor funding for up to 50–60% of its total budget.

Overall, the high increase in the number of higher education suppliers in Mozambique, vis-à-vis inadequate funding, especially of state universities, has intensified competition among the various institutions. The competition is not just for financial resources but also other 'resources' such as legitimacy and prestige.

As already highlighted in the paper an emergent competitive strategy for many HEIs following the 'crowding' of the field is making claims of excellence. Some of the claims of excellence made by some universities in the two countries are illustrated below.

Claims of excellence by some universities in Kenya and Mozambique

The central argument in this paper is that claims of excellence are not just mere rhetoric; they are deliberately constructed appeals to various audiences to attract a range of resources. Tables 1 and 2 below show some of the claims of excellence made by some universities in Kenya and Mozambique.

Discussion

This study has its roots in two sets of theoretical concerns, one philosophical and another sociological. The philosophical stance stalks from attempts we have undertaken to map the possibilities of the "real" intentions of claims of excellence in higher education, seen as *perlocutionary acts*, i.e. utterances which perform acts by the saying of it (Austin 1978), on targeted constituencies. The excerpts in Tables 1 and 2 generally give substance to Austin's dictum: "*Doing things with words*". Following Austin (1978) we argue that the statements and the claims therein are not just saying something, rather, they are performing certain kinds of actions. The claims of excellence by Kenyan and Mozambican universities (Tables 1, 2) are, among other things, self-praising, presenting an image of providers of high quality services, trainers of highly employable graduates, producers of high quality research and employers of top academics. The universities are promoting themselves; they are persuasively claiming unique attributes and legacies. The claims by the universities, we argue, are not necessarily meant to describe some state of affairs, or to 'state some fact', but are performing a certain action. They are, inter alia, persuading, promising, vowing, self-praising; the purpose of which is, inter alia, to attract important resources such as students, staff, prestige and legitimacy.

When Eduardo Mondlane University claims that it is the 'major, oldest and largest institution in Mozambique' and Kenyatta University claims that it is 'home to some of the world's top scholars and researchers' (Mugenda 2008), they are not just describing "a fact", even though that fact maybe true or false; rather, they are positioning themselves in a competitive social space. They are also sending a message to certain constituencies about what their position is and what it means to be in that position. Sociologically, it means that

Table 1 Claims of excellence by some Kenyan Universities

Institution	Year of establishment	Claims
University of Nairobi	1970	"Established over five decades ago, the University has grown to become the premier institution of higher learning in the country and one of the best in the region. …" (Magoha 2008: 6)
		"… The University of Nairobi is committed to its vision of becoming a world-class African University whose mission is to extend the frontiers of knowledge through teaching, research, creative works, consultancy and community service. To that end, we have continued our long tradition of providing quality and relevant education to meet the needs of our nation and the world at large" (Magoha 2006a: 5)
		"… The University of Nairobi has a distinguished record and accomplishment in teaching, research, development, consultancy and entrepreneurship. The University has responded to the country's, regional, Africa's and international high-level manpower training needs and demands by developing programmes and specializations in pure sciences, applied sciences and technology, humanities, social sciences and the arts" (Magoha 2006a, b: 13)
		"Ladies and Gentlemen, the young men and women before you are a quality product because the University of Nairobi admits the best students whenever the selection is done. With over 400 academic programmes and 1,500 academic staff, we are an institution with a proud tradition of leadership in academic excellence. As I speak to you today, a number of the graduands have already been admitted to top international universities like Cambridge to undertake postgraduate studies" (Magoha 2007: 10)
Moi University (MU)	1984	"Since its inception, [Moi University] has advanced to be Kenya's leading university in teaching, research and development…" (http://www.mu.ac.ke/)
Kenyatta University (KU)	1985	"Kenyatta University is home to some of the world's top scholars and researchers. We pride ourselves on providing high quality programmes that attract individuals who wish to be globally employable" (Mugenda 2008)
		"What gives graduates an edge with their future employers is a hands-on knowledge of their particular profession. Towards this noble end, Kenyatta University has established meaningful links with industrial partners, who guide the University on practical, professional requirements which need to be built into programmes at Kenyatta University. As a result, the University's courses give our graduates a distinct advantage in the workplace" (Mugenda 2008).
		"Kenyatta University has constantly maintained its identity as Kenya's premier academic and research institution" (KU 2008:4)
		"Kenyatta University is proud that it has produced world class graduands, whose professional presence across the world is phenomenal" (Mugenda 2007)
Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (JKUAT)	1994	"Information Technology Centre (ITC) at Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (JKUAT) is recognized throughout East and Central Africa as a leader in both training and innovation. The centre and its graduates have long been at the forefront of innovative software in accounts, transport, communication, and insurance. The ITC is leading the way in these research discoveries and its students and alumni have been fostering JKUAT's proud tradition of excellence and innovation" (Mukulu 2008)

Table 2 Claims of excellence by some Mozambican Universities

Institution	Year of establishment	Claims
Catholic University of Mozambique (UCM)	1995	"The Catholic University of Mozambique deserves great praise for its engagement in providing health care, a fundamental social need. The existence of the Faculty of Medicine, one of two in the country, constitutes a tribute to the ideal of education with a focus on community service in its broad sense. It gives us a brilliant example of engagement for human dignity and social justice…" (UCM 2008)
		"The Faculty of Education and Communication, particularly its department of education, is already a remarkable reference for its excellence and quality in terms of the programmes it offers. Our graduates are highly absorbed by the labour market where they are appointed to top positions of responsibility" (UCM 2008)
		"Education, as everybody knows, was, it still is, and will always be one of the key, if not the most important instrument in the fight against underdevelopment. As we are aware of the importance of education, particularly in our department [Education], we make sure that we provide quality education. Our graduates leave here with knowledge and expertise. These are the fundamental requisites of building and sustaining a healthy and harmonious society" (UCM 2008)
		"We invest in acquiring the most and best qualified academic staff, and in the use of the most advanced and innovative learning approaches and methods, and in the use of technology, among other things. Our students receive a *VIP treatment*, a *sine qua non* condition for the development of their capabilities and excellent pedagogic performance" (UCM 2008)
Higher Institute for Transport and Communications (ISUTC)	2004	"Secure your future, with a solid education [from us]" (ISUTC 2008)
The Polytechnic University (UP).	1995	"The school for higher learning and business is a centre of excellence in areas of training, research and business, which combines academic strength and a pragmatic market vision; training motivated people to become the successful professional leaders, with solid ethical principle" (ESAEN 2008)
Higher Institute for Science and Technology of Mozambique (ISCTEM)	1995	"Create your future in a successful place to study in Mozambique. In a context of an accelerated development of higher education institutions, in the country, ISCTEM assumes the challenge to offer a learning experience that makes a difference. For 12 years now, ISCTEM offers undergraduate and post-graduate courses and short term training courses that train highly competitive professionals for the national, regional and international market" (ISCTEM 2008a, b)
Eduardo Mondlane University (UEM)	1962	"UEM, the major, oldest and largest university in the country (UEM 2008)"

Table 2 continued

Institution	Year of establishment	Claims
		"UEM acknowledges that there are certain disciplines which other universities will never offer programmes. UEM will remain for a very long time the leading institution and people know that ISCTEM, PU or any other private institution will not offer a reliable programme in physics, engineering and so forth" (Langa 2006, p. 116)
Pedagogic University (PU)	1985	"…With us embrace your dream of building a better world through education". (http://www.up.ac.mz/) "Pedagogic University is now the largest university in Mozambique with more than 35 000 students" (ibid)

the social space of higher education institutions has become a structured space of distribution of positions and capitals that is a consequence, as we mentioned before, of the entrance of new actors of higher education providers, and an emergent context of declining or scarce resources. Universities have to raise their flags, exhibit in their websites and in the public sphere what they perceive to be their 'achievements'. They want to allege, inter alia, how well 'connected' they are with their (international) congeners (social capital); they want to convince that they have the "best" researchers and academic staff (scientific and academic capital) and so forth.

The argument that claims of evidence do not necessarily describe a fact is further enhanced when several institutions operating in the same field lay claim to an indivisible reality. A good example is the claim by three Kenyan universities as the leading higher education institutions in the country, viz.:

> Established over five decades ago, the University [of Nairobi] has grown to become *the premier institution of higher learning in the country* … (Magoha 2008, p. 6).
>
> Kenyatta University has constantly maintained its identity as *Kenya's premier academic and research institution* (KU Newsletter Vol. 4 (6), 3).
>
> Since its inception, [Moi University] *has advanced to be Kenya's leading university in teaching, research and development*… (http://www.mu.ac.ke/).

Given the indivisible nature of the fact being claimed, and the fact that all the three universities are located in the same country, only one of them can be the premier institution of higher learning in that country. Assuming that one of the three universities is the leading HEI in Kenya, then, the other two are (re)presenting a misleading reality, but are, of course, doing things with words a la Austin (1978).

The claims of excellence are also ascertaining a relation. It is within the relational context of the field of higher education in Kenya and Mozambique that the claims of excellence illustrated in Tables 1 and 2 should be understood and interpreted. The context is that of a field in which different institutions perceive themselves positioned in a "real" or imaginary hierarchal social space on the basis of distribution of capital. In Bourdieu's terms, we are arguing that the field of higher education:

> "is a space of play and competition in which social agents and institutions which possess the determinate quantity of specific capital (political, economic and cultural in particular) […] confront one another in strategies aimed at preserving or transforming this balance of forces" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 76).

Universities thus "confront one another". They are aware of the existence of their rivals or competitors, and seek to position (promote) themselves as superior or transform the structure of the field. For instance, UP claims that it is the first and largest private higher education to be established in Mozambique. As UEM claims to be, factually, the first and major higher education institution in the country, UP will thus dispute what should be considered the second best. These kinds of claims are based on the untested assumption that being the first means having accumulated experience, and thus excellence.

Another example comes from the Pedagogic University, a long time 'rival' of UEM. The institution claims to be the largest university in Mozambique in terms of student numbers, surpassing UEM by more than 10 thousand students. The Catholic University of Mozambique could also make the case for being the first not- for-profit or religious higher education institution in the country. Perhaps, that explains the reason why many of its claims of excellence are supported by the moral considerations of a university committed to community service (see Table 2). In the case of the Kenyan universities, Kenyatta University claims to be home to some of the world's top scholars and researchers and that it provides "high quality programmes that attract individuals who wish to be globally employable". Not to be left behind, the University of Nairobi describes its graduands as a "quality product" that has benefitted from the university's proud tradition of "academic excellence". The point here is that in the relational space of higher education providers, each institution will command whatever it perceives brings an additional value to its capitals whether economic (funding), cultural (qualified academics), political and symbolic (power & prestige). In doing so, higher education institutions are guided by what they perceive is the "real" or imaginary positions and dispositions of their peers or competitors in the field.

There is a "game" that is being played in this field. Considerations of how social field works are shot through with what Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) called "*feel for the game*" as a consequence of a field effect operating. Public universities in Africa, for instance, perceive themselves in a context where their private peers are doing, and more than doing, promising to do what they (public universities) have been doing solely for a long time. The private institutions will also appeal to what they perceive is their strength to make the case for excellence to attract capital.

As shown in the excerpts in Tables 1 and 2, given the diverse resource (capital) needs of HEIs, claims of excellence are constructed to appeal to particular audiences for particular resources. For example, the following excerpt from a speech by the vice chancellor of the University of Nairobi (UoN) during one of the institution's graduation ceremonies is targeted at; inter alia, employers, other universities, prospective students and parents:

> Ladies and Gentlemen, the young men and women before you are a quality product because the University of Nairobi admits the best students whenever the selection is done. With over 400 academic programmes and 1,500 academic staff, we are an institution with a proud tradition of leadership in academic excellence.
>
> As I speak to you today, a number of the graduands have already been admitted to top international universities like Cambridge to undertake postgraduate studies (Magoha 2007: 10).

One of the claims by the Catholic University of Mozambique (CUM) is another example:

> We invest in acquiring the most and best qualified academic staff, and in the use of the most advanced and innovative learning approaches and methods, and in the use of technology, among other things. Our students receive a VIP treatment, a *sine qua non* condition for the development of their capabilities and excellent pedagogic performance (UCM 2008).

In the UoN excerpt, the vice chancellor not only stakes a claim at legitimacy and prestige but also makes a vow to the university's many publics that only top students are admitted at the institution. The vice chancellor also gives a promise to prospective students—that 'if you enrol with us you are likely to be admitted at prestigious universities for further studies'. The second excerpt (UCM) is obviously geared at attracting students and also prestige and legitimacy.

An important observation is that hardly are the purported realities in the claims of excellence grounded in solid evidence, which reinforces the argument that the claims are not tailored to state a fact. For instance when the vice chancellor of Kenyatta University claims that the institution is 'home to some of the world's top scholars and researchers', she does not provide evidence to back up this claim. In cases where an attempt is made to provide evidence, it is not uncommon for the 'evidence' to be presented in self-serving ways. Though South African universities are not the focus of this analysis, a recent advertisement by a South African university illustrates this point better. In the advertisement (Mail and Guardian (August 15, 2008), the university, inter alia, rightfully states that the first South African in space was its alumna, and that it was the only university in Africa ranked in the top 200 worldwide (Times Higher Education Supplement). For obvious reasons, the advertisement does not mention that the institution was the 200th in the said ranking, and that its alumna visited space as a tourist and not as a space scientist. Visiting space as a tourist surely does not require a university education and does not reveal anything about the tourist's alma mater. It is a feat that any generously resourced individual can attain.

On the same note of evidence, a recent study by Wangenge-Ouma (2006, 2008a) provides some evidence showing academics and students contesting some of the claims of excellence made by their university. In the study, several students who joined the university partly because they were persuaded by the claims of excellence made by the university when advertising the programmes they enrolled in expressed dissatisfaction with the 'actual' quality of the programmes. Some academics also admitted that the university advertised some programmes deemed to be 'market driven' and claimed the programmes were of high quality when in the actual sense the university did not have the capacity to offer the programmes (Wangenge-Ouma 2006, 2008a). This is probably a classic example of information asymmetry as regards experience goods. Students only discover the true 'excellence', or 'reality' of the programmes after enrolling, and of course, after paying fees. It seems universities strategically take advantage of the phenomenon of information asymmetry to survive in a competitive environment. They project an illusion of perfection in what they do. Thus, 'illusion of perfection' is now constitutive of the "game" as illustrated in the Kenyan and Mozambican higher education.

Overall, from Austin's perspective, one can see that both in Kenya and Mozambique, the claims of excellence captured in the speeches by university officials, the universities' publicity materials and literature; are targeting certain constituencies in an advertorial manner. The claims are not made in a vacuum; they are performing a certain kind of action,

which must be interpreted in a corresponding manner. Generally, claims of excellence constitute an attempt by HEIs to (re)present themselves in the best possible ways to attract various forms of capital. As Van Vught (2007) points out, they underline the institutions' self-acclaimed qualities hoping that by emphasizing these qualities, they will be able to convince clients of their attractiveness.

Concluding remarks

This paper has made several claims, the most important of which is that universities make claims of excellence as a way of competitively positioning themselves in terms of accessing resources, both tangible ones like students, funding and skilled researchers, and intangible ones such as legitimacy, reputation and prestige. Resources such as legitimacy, reputation and prestige are eventually expected to result into tangible resources such as high enrolments, enrolment of good students and those who can pay fees, research contracts, donors, and skilled researchers. Thus, claims of excellence by higher education suppliers, particularly in the context of higher education commercialisation and marketisation resemble a certain strategic (social and discursive) action or response to the 'new' competitive environment. As Bourdieu would put it, claims of excellence are mobilized as a trick in the game within the field of higher education.

As we have claimed, the claims of excellence made by universities do not seem to derive from evidence. Consequently, the claims can be described as advertisements geared at eliciting particularly favourable impressions and responses from target audiences. Claims of excellence are thus not 'innocent', and can be compared to slogans and pledges or promises by politicians during election campaigns. Just like politicians seek to mobilise support by making promises and pledges, so do HEIs.

The practice by HEIs to mobilise claims of excellence for competitive advantage raises several questions: (a) should universities be held accountable for the claims of excellence that they make? (b) What are the ethical implications of the kind of university behaviour discussed in this paper? (c) How can consumers of higher educational services be protected from mediocre services made to look good through claims of excellence? These are questions for further debate.

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