The Examinations Council of Zambia: Transforming the reputation of a governmental institution

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TEACHING NOTES

Teaching Plan

The purpose of the following teaching plan is to provide instructing guidelines on how to teach the presented case. In order for the instructor to set the scene, organise the discussion, structure the relevant key facts and prepare a recommended solution, the following notes should be studied in detail beforehand. Especially as the case deals with a rather unusual area within the branding literature, the area of governmental institution branding, it is essential to follow the suggested instructions below in order for the class to get the maximum learning experience out of the case. The teaching plan also elaborates more in detail on these specific learning objectives which should be achieved with this case. First of all, the case synopsis will present the most important aspects to be considered for the case until later, further points regarding target group, reflection etc will be brought up together with the learning objectives afterwards.

Case Synopsis

The Examinations Council of Zambia (ECZ) is the governmental organisation responsible for the conduction of public school examinations and the awarding of educational certificates in Zambia. The certificates are awarded to students fulfilling the requirements of passing the Zambian higher education tests. With the certificates, students can reflect their learning achievements as well as validate their eligibility to attend university. The ECZ is increasingly struggling with different kinds of school examination malpractices, affecting the organisation's credibility as an operating institution conducting these examinations. The different malpractices include, but are not limited to, copying, illegal assistance, collusion, smuggling in of unauthorised materials, and impersonation. Furthermore, their certificates have been forged by people using them in the application processes. Over the course of the previous years, numbers of reported examination malpractice cases, as well as forged certificates, have risen, reaching it's highest ever peak this year (2013). These issues have several negative effects on the ECZ's reputation. This case is about the ECZ's operational problems and their imminent loss of control regarding their institutional reputation, which is closely connected to the reputation of the whole educational system and the country as a whole.

Target Group

Students studying at business schools, specifically interested in the corporate brand and reputation management, change management, intercultural management, marketing management within politics and governmental institutions. Additionally, this case could be interesting for students studying politics, sociology or international law.

Learning Objectives

The learning objectives can be clustered into three different areas: Gaining an understanding of the complexity of solving branding and reputational issues within both governmental institutions as well as in the context of third world countries, how to transform an organisation and as a third objective Corporate reputation building:

Third world countries - challenges and structure of society play a lot bigger/different role than in Western countries

The learning objectives are to make students familiar with the multifaceted issues institutions especially in African countries are faced with. It provides not only managerial but also cultural learning. Students have to be able to view the challenges from different perspectives, putting themselves into the shoes of a public organisation within a developing country. This requires an understanding of cultural differences and fundamental educational and infrastructural issues they have not been exposed to. Further, this case allows students to extend their understanding of brand management onto the issues of a governmental organisation and in which way they can be perceived as a brand. Additionally, it highlights the difficulties and the restrictions put on these institutions by the government, its way of working and policies which put a lot of pressure and restriction on institutions during the brand building process in the context of politics. At the same, it is important for the students to learn that political and governmental institutions just as well need to maintain a certain level of reputation and face similar when not even more difficult problems when approaching branding. To resolve this case, both operational as well as communicational steps need to be taken. In order to assess the damaging effects on the reputation, the Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix (Urde & Greyser, 2016) can be used. Furthermore, a reputation strategy has to be developed which both recovers the current reputation damage of the ECZ brand but also builds it up. In the future, the ECZ might be faced with stronger competition (Cambridge Exams). To be prepared for that potential battle, its reputation needs to be built up and made strong now to be prepared for that in the best way. This case can be reapplied to any other third world country being faced with the same issues but also to brands which are affected by severe reputation sufferings due to the upcoming of the internet.

Transforming an organisation

The case of the ECZ is exemplary for an organisation where a substantial change and transformation process is required, in order to solve multiple problems which affect not only the future of an organisation but the country as a whole. This is best done in eight steps as illustrated by Kotter (2007):

1. Establishing a sense of urgency
2. Forming a powerful guiding coalition
3. Creating a vision
4. Communicating the vision
5. Empowering others to act on the vision
6. Planning for and creating short-term wins
7. Consolidating improvements and producing still more change
8. Institutionalising new approaches

Since this change does not only affect one institution, the ECZ can be seen as the initiator of this process. It is upon them to establish a sense of urgency among other institutions, the Ministry of Education and last but not the least, the government. By shedding light on contemporary problems, their negative outcomes and the possible benefits of transforming the system, they can create this sense of urgency.

In a second step, the ECZ can find partners to form a coalition in this change process. This is best done by finding supportive individuals in each institution which is affected. Only if the coalition is strong enough, creating and communicating the vision will be successful. A sensible vision is key to a successful organisational transformation (Kotter, 2007).

As presented in this case, the Council is lacking a vision. Developing this vision is also a vital step for building the ECZ and the Ministry of Education's corporate brand (Urde, 2013). Once the necessity to change along with the vision of the future is impersonated by a wide number of fellows, responsible leaders will have to act upon this vision. Ideally, the government as a crucial player in the change process can be turned into a visionary, thereby willing to spend more resources and allow for bigger changes within the institutions. Bearing in mind the short-term oriented culture of Zambia, it is even more important to create short-term wins during this process. As the benefits of improved education are reaped after the long-term, the ECZ should focus on short-term goals such as reduced occurrences of examination malpractices and an improved certificate verification system. In the governmental environment where the ECZ is operating in, it is faced with potential changes of political leaders every five years. This will make the last two steps especially challenging. Nevertheless, it is important to keep track of improvements made and institutionalise the new processes the transformation brings (Kotter, 2007).

Corporate Brand and Reputation building

To cite Roper and Fill (p. Preface xvi, 2012): "All organisations, large and small, commercial, government, charities, educational and other not-for-profit enterprises, need to develop and sustain a positive reputation amongst their stakeholders." After realising the necessity to change, building a corporate brand in order to be associated with a strong reputation is an essential and integral step in the change process and for the future of the Zambian education system. One of the vocal issues presented in the case of the ECZ is the lack of a corporate brand identity, a vision and consequently, a coherent reputation.

Although the reputational problems may catch the reader's' first attention, the root of the problem lies much deeper: in the missing corporate brand of the governmental institutions. A strong corporate culture can only be built through a consistent and all-embracing understanding of the organisation's values and promise - essentially its brand core (Urde, 2013). This case raises the students' awareness of how important the stakeholders' understanding of the corporate brand and corporate culture is. It is an example of a lack of understanding "who we are" and "the way we do things around here" (Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007; Deal & Kennedy, 1982). Without an internal awareness and commitment towards the corporate brand, a strong reputation is impossible to build (Urde and Greyser, 2016). The necessity to firstly, build the ECZ's corporate brand from the inside out and secondly, communicate and demonstrate it externally in order to build a reputation is demonstrated in this case.

Overview of key learnings

The table below presents the key learning objectives provided in this case.

Table A: Key Learning Objectives

Key Learning Objectives		
Remembering	… the importance between brand identity and reputation.	Here: Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix, Urde & Greyser (2016)
Understanding	… the cultural and societal complexity of the case.	Here: Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions and organizations across nations, Hofstede (2001); (students are expected to have learned about this in their previous studies)
Applying	… corporate brand management and reputation knowledge on a governmental institution, being a part of a country brand.	Here: Governmental branding, Country branding, country attractiveness (Rooper & Fill, 2012)
Evaluating	… the severeness of the situation and the need for transformation.	Here: Using Kotter's eight steps of transformation (2007).
Creating	… an action plan for an institution to initiate a change, which will improve their reputation.	Here: Base action plan on Kotter's eight steps of transformation (2007).

Discussion Questions

In the following, discussion questions are presented, which are aimed at encouraging a good class discussion while simultaneously ensuring that the learning objectives are achieved by the class within the discussion.

Main question:

- ***What can the ECZ do in order to transform its corporate brand reputation?***

Assisting questions (the assisting questions are used as the main question is relatively complex. In order for it to being answered in a reasonable amount of time (instead of multiple hours over days) and for the discussion participants to quickly pick up all relevant areas relevant for answering the main question, the sub-questions were developed as a guideline for the class to answer the main question):
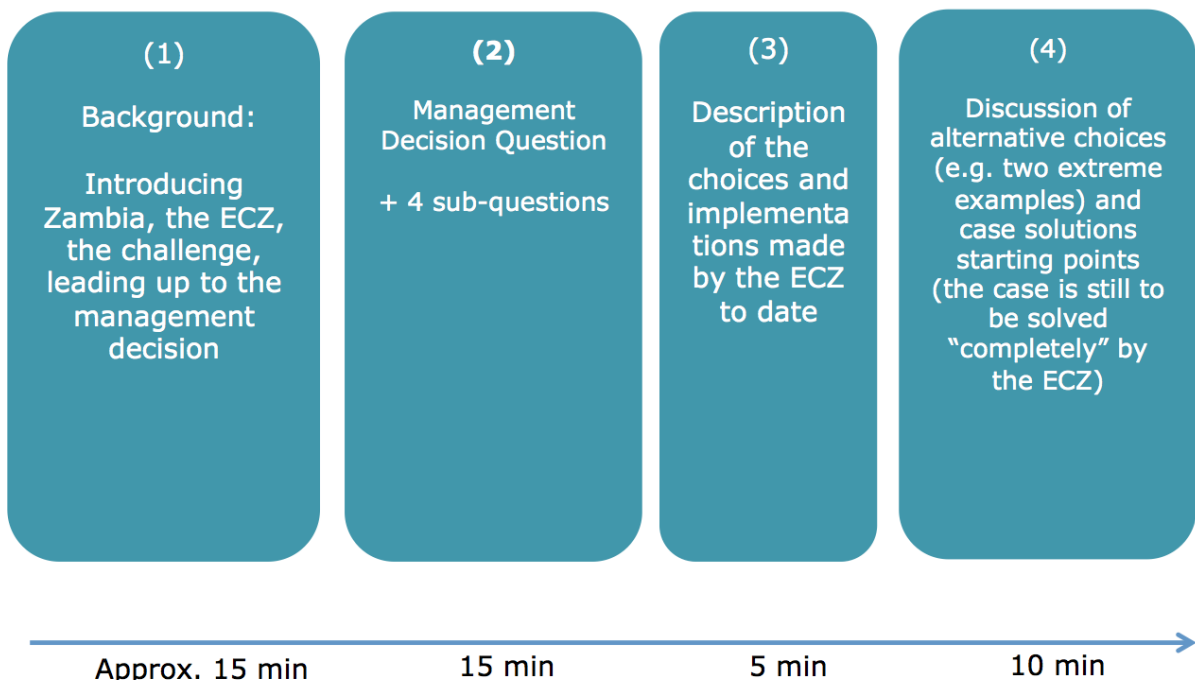
- What are the challenges the ECZ is facing?
- Where do they stem from?
- Who is affected by the issues - who are the stakeholders?
- Should the ECZ cooperate with someone? With who and in what way?

Teaching suggestions

When presenting the case in front of the class, it is suggested to make clear that the students understand the different stakeholder parties involved in the problem net. Furthermore, it should be made sure that the students understand the complexity of answering the question and at least gain a basic understanding about the country, its workings and background. In order to ensure this, the attached PowerPoint presentation can be used to allow for this. To get a better understanding about the challenges that the ECZ is facing, a one-minute video will be presented. The Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix (Urde & Greyser, 2016), will be presented in order to assess the threats for the reputation. Additionally, before diving into the case discussion, the class should be given the opportunity to ask clarifying questions before diving into the discussion. To start the discussion, the instructors should set up a role play, where the participants take the roles as members of the board of ECZ.

The role the instructor has is to lead the discussion, without influencing the comments made by the participants. The main question will be visible to the participants during the discussion, in order to facilitate the discussion. The assisting questions will be presented on a second slide in the PowerPoint, along with the main question in case the assisting questions are needed. If they are not needed, the instructor will skip this slide. During the discussion the instructors will use the board plan, with the headings *Issues, Alternatives and Actions,* as presented in **Table B**. Using this board plan will help structuring the discussion.

Figure A: Time Plan

(1) Background: Introducing Zambia, the ECZ, the challenge, leading up to the management decision	(2) Management Decision Question + 4 sub-questions	(3) Description of the choices and implementations made by the ECZ to date	(4) Discussion of alternative choices (e.g. two extreme examples) and case solutions starting points (the case is still to be solved "completely" by the ECZ)
Approx. 15 min	15 min	5 min	10 min

The time plan shown above should act as a guidance for the case discussion leader. It is tailored for a case lasting about 45 minutes. However, it is suggested that if possible, more time should be planned in for the second part, the management decision question discussion. The case topic is quite complex and doesn't have an easy "right or wrong" approach. That is why a longer discussion could go more in detail giving specific suggestions on how to approach every single root issue or challenge in order to solve the big question.

In order to structure and assist the discussion, the case instructor is advised to use the three categories "challenges - alternatives - actions" to note down and cluster the contributions made of the course. These three categories should be written on the board in three separate columns. While the three first questions address mainly identify potential issues and challenges, the fourth sub question aims at identifying possible alternatives and recommended actions for the ECZ to take. In clustering the classes' contributions in that order, reflecting back on previously made points while keeping in mind all essential conditions will facilitate a better discussion excluding unnecessary inquiries or double-mentions of the same thing or actions/alternatives built without a red thread.

A recommended filled-out board plan including the entirety of case challenges, alternatives and actions could look like the following:

Table B: Board Plan

Issues/Challenges	Alternatives	Actions
Educational Issues - "Country brand" *Teacher commitment* • *Not preparing students* • *Low motivation and engagement* *Pupils engagement* • *Cheating* • *Not studying* • *Low motivation* *Educational level - low passing rate* *Low investment in education* *Society* **External** Lack of internet access on the examination centres Increased internet usage Competition (Cambridge) Malpractices Infrastructure Forging of certificates **Internal** Changing staff of policy makers (affecting brand building attempts) Lack of strategy Lack of engagement Lack of urgency Lack of vision -> lack of understanding of corporate brand No communication to stakeholders Credibility issues No transparency (about issues) No credibility Reputational damage **Damaged reputation**	1. Close collaboration with institutions 2. Distancing from institutions	1. Actions Alternative 1 - Campaign for importance of education, integrity - Set up system for ongoing communication with stakeholders 2. Actions Alternative 2 - work closed off - Denial - transfer responsibility to other institutions - official statement 3. Other Actions - Create strategic plan - Vision for future - Communicate with internal and external stakeholders about the issues and the actions → Be transparent and authentic. - Implement online verification system

Epilogue

Understanding the grid in which reputation for the ECZ is spun and simultaneously damaged is critical when trying to solve this case. So far, decisions such as building a proper vision to guide operational and reputational decisions and measures to reduce the individual malpractice directly have been introduced. Nevertheless, the challenge keeps existing: After having taken first steps, to ensure long-term success, governmental institutions and the ECZ have to work in close cooperation. With one of our colleagues being one of the responsible Council employees in the grid for starting and supporting the change, he would certainly take some suggestions from the class discussions and our group work back to Zambia to be considered for their appropriateness and implemented if possible. These consequences make the case not only a great tool for students to learn about reputational cases in unusual contexts and about change processes within the brand building in third world countries, but just as well this case and its delivered solutions might help to actually improve the position of the ECZ in real life.

Reflection

In the following reflection, four main topics will be covered: The process of finding the case, the way the actual case writing was performed and the special circumstances of writing this case - in terms of group constellation, information scarcity and cultural understanding. Eventually, the process of the trial case and the findings of it will be brought up.

Case topic finding

The case idea was to set it up around the reputational issues facing public organisations. Through our informal interaction with Zambian colleagues, we were motivated to pursue a case from that country based on a number of good educational strides learned through the ECZ. Aside from this, of particular interest was the fact that Zambia was regarded as a balcony of peace in Southern Africa and extremely famous for her mighty Victoria Falls- one of the seven wonders of the world. As initially assumed, not all of it was that simple:

The first challenge was the very limited access to background readings and information on the actual case situation. This meant that we mainly had to rely on the information from the institutional website and personal insights and experiences from our Zambian colleagues. Getting first-hand information was super valuable. Becoming first of all aware of how the country of Zambia is set up, how society works, how people tick and later how the entire structure of the ECZ within the government is intertwined took us several hours of meetings to understand culture, country and third world country issues in general. Only once we aligned that knowledge, we were starting to grasp the root problems and the complexity of the task of reputation building. Simply using one model would not be enough.

In order to address and solve the issue, numerous stakeholders had to be pictured and taken into account - one had to actually understand what it was like to work for the ECZ in Zambia. Working for an educational institution, there is no comparison to any governmental institution in Sweden. The behaviour and rules are different - in order to change things there, one has to start at a whole different level. That's when we realised: Writing that case for a fifteen-minute class discussion would be insanely tough.

At the same time, we were thrilled by the opportunity of diving into a completely different case - this wasn't about the usual corporate branding issue in a Western world. This was about a highly bureaucratical institution being faced with problems most third world countries struggle with. Being able to rebuild the reputation actually, would have a huge influence on the reputation of an entire country as a whole. More importantly, we had the once in a lifetime chance of actually being able to take our findings and recommendations gained during the case solving in class to Zambia through our colleague in the team. Oh, we were so thrilled and ready to start this challenge!

Case processing

As previously mentioned, the main difficulty of starting with the case was actually to find it. In order to do so, we had to ask ourselves tonnes of questions and went through endless Zambian documents from the official ECZ website and some other online credible government sources. We also made efforts as a group to ask our Zambian colleagues on certain issues we were not clear of after our search, just to get hold of the entire complexity of the case situation. But it was so worth it! What can be criticised for our initial approach is that we soon tried to define the case - to get issues written on paper being able to quickly continue. That had been the way it had always been in prior group works: We discovered that this approach of quickly deciding on a case and then continue to dive into it would not be fruitful in our Zambian corporate reputation issue. Initially, it often happened that we had a case defined, based on the information available, and started to feel that it contained everything essential and seemed like a sort of stable basis to continue. Then, when we met, we would discuss and identify a new perspective on the issue. This new information would change our entire case again from ground up. After having several "bombing information moments" bringing our entire case construction to ashes, we finally reached a point where the four of us felt able to grasp the entire complexity of what it meant to be an employee working for the ECZ. After being on the same level in terms of understanding, we were finally able to start writing the case. As the reputation problem still exists this day and isn't a simple thing to solve immediately, we decided in line with Mats, to place the case situation in the year 2013. The management decision would then include everything that had been done since 2013 looking back at what had worked and what would still need to be done in the following years from then.

Special circumstances

Certain special circumstances have been previously mentioned: Only one member was really into the topic and "filter person" to collect information and forward it to the rest of the team. Another difficulty was that the other three group members (just as the class will have), had no previous knowledge about the functioning of the state of Zambia nor about brand management of governmental institutions in general nor about special circumstances that had to be considered when dealing with reputation and branding cases regarding third world countries. Having to rely on only one team member that much, especially in the beginning, was challenging. At the same time its learning opportunities were immense. At times, the European team members struggled a bit not to offend our Zambian colleagues in some way due to pure naivety or unknowingness about how things work in an African country. We agreed in the beginning that regardless of what we would say in a certain way, no one in the group should be offended.

We made sure that whenever something potentially offensive was said, all group members were aware that it was never anyone's attention to sound offensive, just that it was a really sensitive topic. The Western students of us struggled incredibly with this, not trying to sound offensive, but agreeing on not-to-take-anything-offensive personally really helped in opening up honest exchange and conversations within the group.

What also helped us to solve the complexity throughout the entire case writing process was, to write constructs, ideas and frameworks on a white board. This helped us to both structure our thoughts and also reach a common understanding. In the end, this constellation of the group was actually highly beneficial, as the different cultural backgrounds of the group members helped to gain very different perspectives on the issue. With one group member having much detail of the case and the workings of the council, we were able to gain some new views on the situation just as well. Still, with time, we grew more and more together as a group, being fascinated in curiosity for each other's cultural differences. We have to admit that this group work by far has been the one with the most international approach and also content that we ever had before.

Trial case

Our case is highly complex. It took us various hours to actually understand the problematic nature behind it. That's why we decided that before performing the actual case in front of the Corporate Brand Management class, a trial case would be needed to figure out at which points students would be struggling. Therefore, we conducted a small case discussion with some of our friends. When we set up the discussion with them, we wrote all the main findings on the whiteboard, clustering it in a similar way as presented in **Table B**. Reflecting back with them our opinion on the main issues helped to discover potential weaknesses and amending the discussion structure.

Initially, before running the trial case, we also thought about assigning the people in the group different positions, such as the Ministry of Education, the Examinations Council of Zambia, a teacher or a malpractising student. As the case and its challenges are already quite complex in nature, we preferred spending time on its explanation instead of its roles. Furthermore, we didn't want people, who had good suggestions for approaching the challenges, not to mention them only because it would not suit their attributed role. That's why we decided to skip this and leave the class as one group eventually.

These findings helped us both for our case writing but also the struggles or questions which arose during the discussion aided us to file the written case and teaching plan up a bit better.

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