

Scaffolded, Strategic, Situated: Designing and Delivering a Postgraduate Programme in Place Branding

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Case Report

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Abstract

Place branding has evolved into a complex, interdisciplinary domain central to governance, tourism, economic development, and public diplomacy, yet the field has lacked dedicated academic provision to prepare its practitioners. This paper examines the professionalisation of place branding through the design and delivery of the MA in Place Branding, one of the first dedicated postgraduate degrees in the discipline, developed in 2022 and delivered in 2023. Drawing on the author's dual position as academic and practitioner, it argues that the field's persistent legitimacy deficit stems in part from the absence of formal educational pathways through which practitioners can acquire shared knowledge, a common analytical language, and an ethical grounding for their work. The paper sets out the theoretical foundations that structured the programme, namely cultural intermediation, stakeholder theory, and systems thinking, and derives from them a five-part professional competency framework spanning theoretical literacy, stakeholder systems management, strategic brand design, evidence-based practice, and ethical stewardship. It proposes a future model for place branding education that is interdisciplinary, practice-informed, globally accessible, and benchmarked against explicit professional standards. The paper contributes to ongoing debate about how place branding can mature into a recognised profession supported by rigorous and sustainable educational infrastructure.

1. Introduction

Place branding has matured considerably over the past two decades. It has evolved from a marketing subdiscipline into a complex, interdisciplinary domain that engages questions of identity, governance, and civic strategy (Kavaratzis and Hatch 2013; Lucarelli 2018; Zenker and Erfgen 2014). The field now operates across policy areas that include tourism, urban planning, economic development, cultural policy, and public diplomacy. Despite this expansion in scope and significance, its formal educational infrastructure remains underdeveloped. Practitioners enter the profession from diverse disciplinary backgrounds such as urban planning, communications, marketing, and public administration, and they often do so without training specific to the ethical, strategic, and interdisciplinary demands of place-based identity work.

This paper addresses that gap. It documents the conception, design, delivery, and institutional trajectory of the MA in Place Branding, delivered at a post-1992 university in London, one of the first dedicated postgraduate degrees in the discipline. Developed by the author in 2022 and delivered in 2023, the programme was a deliberate response to what had long been identified as a persistent training deficit in the field (Warren, 2025). The paper offers an original contribution to the scholarship of place branding and to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) by giving a theoretically grounded account of how postgraduate education in an emergent, interdisciplinary professional field can be designed, what it can achieve, and why its institutional conditions matter.

Beyond these educational outcomes, this paper signals a vital shift in the professionalization of place branding. By establishing a rigorous academic home for the discipline, a post-graduate programme in

place branding can provide a necessary scaffold for practice, including standardizing shared knowledge, developing a common analytical language, and pivoting the field from ad-hoc promotion toward a more cohesive model of strategic governance. For practitioners, these implications are significant: they offer a pathway to bridge the legitimacy gap that has long characterized the profession, enabling them to operate not merely as message managers, but as reflexive, values-led cultural intermediaries capable of navigating complex multi-stakeholder landscapes with both critical insight and practical authority.

This paper first situates the programme within the professional and intellectual landscape of place branding, drawing on practitioner research and field-level analysis to establish the case for dedicated postgraduate provision. It then sets out the theoretical framework that underpinned the programme's design before examining its curriculum architecture, pedagogical principles, and assessment strategy. The analysis further explores the programme's stakeholder relevance and civic significance, followed by a critical reflection on the structural conditions that constrained its sustainability. Finally, the paper considers implications for the future of place branding education and concludes by positioning the programme's legacy within a broader argument for professionalising the field.

Positionality and Methodological Frame

This paper adopts an autoethnographic case study approach (Chang 2008; Denzin 2014), drawing on the author's experience as designer and lead academic of the MA in Place Branding. The author occupies a dual position, as a practitioner-scholar with more than a decade of experience in place branding education, consultancy, and research, and as the programme leader who conceptualised, validated, and delivered the programme under examination. This positioning is not incidental to the analysis. It is constitutive of it. As Bochner and Ellis (2016) argue, autoethnographic inquiry is well suited to the study of professional practice in emergent fields, where the researcher's situatedness within the phenomenon yields insights that detached observation cannot reach. The method also carries a responsibility for critical reflexivity. The author's institutional investment in the programme's success is acknowledged here, and the analysis that follows attends deliberately to structural and systemic factors, including those beyond the author's control, that shaped the programme's outcomes. The paper does not claim generalisability in the conventional sense. It offers instead a theoretically grounded and critically reflective case study intended to generate transferable insights for educators, programme designers, and scholars working to advance place branding as a discipline and a profession.

2. Context: The Professional and Educational Landscape of Place Branding

In a policy context, place branding has been defined as an ongoing, participatory, and evidence-informed process through which governments and stakeholders articulate a shared identity and value proposition for a place, and use that identity to guide strategic decisions, coordinate action, and communicate coherently across audiences (Boisen et al. 2018; Kavaratzis and Hatch 2013). This definition reflects a significant conceptual shift away from the field's earlier, more promotional framing. Contemporary

scholarship increasingly positions place branding as a governance mechanism, one that operates not only at the level of communication but also upstream in decision-making, where it helps shape investment priorities, partnerships, and policy frameworks (Warren et al., 2021; Eshuis and Edwards 2013; Lucarelli 2018).

This governance turn has been accompanied by growing professional demand. Over the past decade, place branding functions have expanded within local and national government, regional development agencies, national tourism organisations, and private-sector consultancies. Practitioners in these roles are routinely expected to navigate complex stakeholder environments, manage competing narratives, and translate civic values into strategic communications, all while operating across political cycles and institutional cultures that are frequently resistant to brand logic (Warren and Dinnie 2018; Warren and Grigaliūnaitė 2023).

Those practitioners have rarely had access to formal education tailored to these demands. Doctoral research in the field, drawing on dozens of in-depth interviews with place branding professionals across several national and municipal contexts, consistently surfaced a shared experience of professional isolation and a deficit of legitimacy, sometimes described by participants as 'imposter syndrome'. Practitioners characterised their work as institutionally valued but intellectually under-recognised, and they frequently cited the absence of a shared disciplinary home, a professional community with common knowledge structures, standards, and language (Warren 2021). This experience aligns with what Maguire and Matthews (2012) identify as a defining feature of the cultural intermediary condition: the performance of influential symbolic work without the institutional recognition it warrants.

The absence of dedicated educational provision contributed directly to this legitimacy gap. By the early 2020s, place branding had established a credible academic publication record, including dedicated journals such as this one, several Routledge handbooks, and a growing citation network. No postgraduate degree programme existed, however, through which practitioners could gain formal disciplinary grounding. Short courses, conference workshops, and practitioner-led webinars had proliferated, but they operated outside the quality assurance frameworks, the critical pedagogical rigour, and the sustained intellectual development that a structured academic programme provides.

Further evidence of unmet demand came from the author's experience as programme leader for an undergraduate degree in advertising, public relations and branding at the same university. That degree included a transnational final-year undergraduate module entitled *Place Branding and International Diplomacy*, delivered across the university's international campuses. Students consistently described the module as the most intellectually engaging and professionally relevant component of their degree and frequently requested pathways for postgraduate specialisation. These observations were reinforced by encouragement from senior industry figures and practitioners affiliated with leading place-branding consultancies and professional networks. Together they confirmed that both professional demand and academic precedent existed for a dedicated MA.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Cultural Intermediation and the Ethics of Representation

The concept of cultural intermediation provided the primary conceptual anchor for the programme. First theorised by Bourdieu (1984) and later developed for media and branding contexts by Moor (2008) and Maguire and Matthews (2012), the concept describes professionals who mediate between production and consumption. Cultural intermediaries select, translate, and legitimise symbolic content, and in doing so they shape how identities are constructed, circulated, and received. In place branding, this intermediation is particularly complex. It involves navigating multi-sector stakeholder environments, managing the intersection of commercial and civic logics, and exercising what Warren and Dinnie (2018) describe as an invisible yet consequential form of influence that operates across political, cultural, and bureaucratic domains simultaneously.

The programme positioned this concept not as a theoretical backdrop but as a guiding professional ethic. Students were encouraged to understand themselves as narrative stewards, professionals with an obligation to the inclusivity, authenticity, and long-term resonance of the place-based stories they help to construct. This framing drew explicitly on the critical place branding literature, which has challenged the field to move beyond corporate marketing logic towards a more participatory and politically accountable model of practice (Aronczyk 2013; Kavaratzis 2009; Lucarelli 2018).

3.2 Stakeholder Theory and Participatory Governance

Stakeholder theory, developed by Freeman (1984) and refined by Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997), provided a second framework. In place branding, the stakeholders of a place are not limited to external target audiences. They include residents, civil servants, cultural institutions, community organisations, diasporas, and many others whose claims on identity and representation must be actively negotiated. Kavaratzis and Kalandides (2015) and Zenker and Erfgen (2014) have each advanced participatory frameworks that locate legitimacy not in top-down brand strategy but in dialogue, co-creation, and transparency, principles now central to the field's governance turn.

These ideas were operationalised throughout the curriculum. Students were trained to map stakeholder networks, design inclusive engagement processes, and anticipate the ethical tensions that arise when identity-making occurs across unequal distributions of power and voice. The concept of the network constellation, the dense and often misaligned web of actors whose competing interests shape place brand outcomes, was introduced as both an analytical tool and an ethical reference point (Warren and Grigaliūnaitė 2023).

3.3 Systems Thinking and Place Complexity

The third pillar of the framework drew on systems thinking, a paradigm rooted in complexity theory and organisational studies (Meadows 2008; Senge 1990). Places are dynamic systems composed of

interconnected social, economic, environmental, and symbolic elements. Branding interventions therefore operate within and upon those systems rather than in isolation from them. This systemic perspective resisted the reductive tendencies of promotional thinking. It encouraged students to analyse unintended consequences, feedback loops, and the longer temporal arcs through which place identities form and reform.

Systems thinking also informed the programme's approach to wicked problems, the complex and multidimensional challenges such as urban inequality, postcolonial identity, and climate-related regeneration that increasingly define the work of place branding practitioners. Students were equipped with tools to map place systems, identify leverage points, and develop adaptive strategies that can evolve as governance priorities shift. This approach connected to Anholt's (2020) argument for a more collaborative and responsibility-oriented framework for understanding how places relate to each other and to global challenges.

3.4 Integrating Theory and Practice

Across all three frameworks, the programme maintained a commitment to integrated and practical application. Theoretical content was never delivered as an abstract backdrop. It was mobilised as a lens through which professional situations could be analysed, critiqued, and acted upon. This commitment aligned with Schön's (1987) concept of the reflective practitioner, a professional who does not simply apply technical knowledge but thinks in action, drawing on conceptual frameworks while remaining attentive to the specific complexity of each situation. For a field as contextually varied and politically contingent as place branding, this capacity for reflective integration is a prerequisite for competent and ethical practice rather than an optional supplement to practical skill.

4. Programme Design and Pedagogical Principles

4.1 Constructive Alignment as Curriculum Architecture

The programme was designed in accordance with the principle of constructive alignment articulated by Biggs and Tang (2011). This approach holds that effective curriculum design begins with clearly specified intended learning outcomes (ILOs) and ensures that all teaching and learning activities and all assessment tasks are coherently aligned with those outcomes. Rather than assembling content inputs and attaching assessment as a separate mechanism, constructive alignment treats the assessment task as the destination and works backwards, so that students are scaffolded towards it through a sequence of meaningful learning activities.

In the MA in Place Branding, this principle was applied at both module and programme level. Each of the five core modules, namely *Place Branding Theories and Concepts*, *Place Brand Strategy and Implementation*, *Stakeholders, Sustainability and Social Cohesion*, *Competitive Advantage, Creativity and the Central Idea*, and *Research Methods and Major Project*, was designed with distinct but mutually reinforcing learning outcomes. Each set of outcomes corresponded to a phase in the professional

lifecycle of place branding practice, moving from conceptual foundations through participatory governance to creative strategy and evidence-based inquiry.

Assessment tasks were constructed to simulate authentic professional outputs, including brand strategy documents, stakeholder engagement frameworks, campaign pitches, and independent research. These outputs are not analogues to professional practice. They are instantiations of it, developed within a critically supervised academic context. This alignment between academic rigour and professional relevance was central to the programme's identity and to its appeal across the cohort's diverse career stages.

Table 1

Module Overview — Intended Learning Outcomes and Constructive Alignment Five core modules | 120 credits total | All at Level 7 (postgraduate) | Designed in accordance with Biggs & Tang (2011) constructive alignment principles

Module	Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)	Assessment Tasks
PLB4000 <i>Place Branding Theories and Concepts</i>	• ILO1: Critically evaluate the historical development and key theoretical frameworks in place branding as an interdisciplinary field. • ILO2: Analyse core brand principles (image, identity, values, equity) as applied to cities, regions, and nations. • ILO3: Apply a structured analytical framework to diagnose a live place brand. • ILO4: Demonstrate advanced academic research and writing skills in a place branding context.	Assessment 1: Literature Review and Contextual Analysis (1,500 words) — situates a chosen place brand within existing scholarship. Assessment 2: Analytical Case Study Essay (2,500 words) — applies theoretical frameworks to evaluate brand challenges and make strategic recommendations.
PLB4001 <i>Place Brand Strategy and Implementation</i>	• ILO1: Define and sequence the key stages of a place brand implementation journey, from audit to activation. • ILO2: Apply strategic decision-making frameworks to complex, politically contested place branding scenarios. • ILO3: Evaluate the practical, political, and professional challenges inherent in delivering a place brand strategy across multi-sector environments. • ILO4: Develop and justify evidence-based solutions to live place branding challenges.	Assessment 1: Strategic Brand Audit Report (2,000 words) — evidence-based mapping of the current brand landscape of a chosen place. Assessment 2: Implementation Roadmap and Reflective Commentary (2,000 words + 500-word reflection) — phased brand implementation plan with critical reflection on choices made.
PLB4002 <i>Stakeholders, Sustainability and Social Cohesion</i>	• ILO1: Critically evaluate the socio-economic and geo-political forces shaping place branding practice, including post-colonialism, climate change, and urban inequality. • ILO2: Assess dominant discourses around social justice, prosperity, and liveability in the context of place identity and communication.	Assessment 1: Critical Issues Briefing (1,500 words) — identifies and analyses a live socio-political issue affecting a specific place brand. Assessment 2: Inclusive Stakeholder Engagement Plan (3,000 words) — maps a multi-sector stakeholder ecosystem and designs a participatory engagement strategy.

Module	Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)	Assessment Tasks
	• ILO3: Design an inclusive stakeholder engagement framework for a specific place branding challenge. • ILO4: Articulate a values-driven, equity-centred action plan that addresses a complex place brand challenge.	
PLB4003 <i>Competitive Advantage, Creativity and the Central Idea</i>	• ILO1: Conduct a competitive brand landscape analysis to establish distinctive place positioning. • ILO2: Develop a compelling central brand idea and articulate its strategic rationale to a professional audience. • ILO3: Apply design thinking and language principles to create coherent brand identity components. • ILO4: Synthesise brand strategy, visual identity, and phased implementation into a comprehensive, professionally presented brand document.	Assessment 1: Brand Position and Vision Statement (500–1,000 words) – competitive context, landscape analysis, and proposed positioning. Assessment 2: Pitch Presentation – persuasive oral/visual pitch of central brand idea to a simulated internal stakeholder panel. Assessment 3: Brand Strategy and Visual Identity Document (3,000 words + visual components) – full brand architecture, creative direction, touchpoints, and phased implementation plan.
PLB4004 <i>Research Methods and Major Project</i>	• ILO1: Demonstrate command of qualitative and/or mixed-methods research design appropriate to place branding inquiry. • ILO2: Apply ethical research principles and professional standards to the collection and analysis of primary and secondary data. • ILO3: Produce an original, sustained piece of independent research or practice project that makes a contribution to knowledge or practice in the field. • ILO4: Defend and contextualise research findings with reference to existing scholarship and professional implications.	Assessment 1: Research Proposal (1,500 words) – research question, methodology, ethical considerations, and indicative literature review. Assessment 2: Major Project / Dissertation (10,000–12,000 words) – original research or practice-based inquiry into a place branding topic of the student's design, supervised by a specialist academic.

4.2 Scaffolded Authentic Assessment

Authentic assessment, as theorised by Wiggins and McTighe (2005) and developed in the higher education literature by Ashford-Rowe, Herrington, and Brown (2014), requires assessment tasks to reflect real-world problems and professional expectations, to demand transfer of learning across contexts, and to generate products that practitioners and stakeholders in the field would recognise as meaningful. In practice this means moving beyond the traditional essay or examination towards tasks that mirror the complexity, ambiguity, and multi-audience demands of actual professional work.

The programme's most developed application of this principle was in the module *Competitive Advantage, Creativity and the Central Idea*, which used a three-stage scaffolded assessment sequence. The first task, a brand position and vision statement of 500 to 1,000 words, required students to conduct substantive background research into a specific place's existing brand landscape, competitive context, and stakeholder dynamics. This foundation informed the second task, a persuasive pitch presentation of a central brand idea delivered in the persona of a municipal brand strategist addressing internal stakeholders. The final task was a comprehensive brand strategy and visual identity document, in which students formalised their brand architecture, articulated creative direction, identified public-facing touchpoints, and developed a phased implementation plan.

This sequence exemplifies what Ashford-Rowe, Herrington, and Brown (2014) identify as the critical elements of authentic assessment, namely challenge, performance, transfer, metacognition, and a product recognisable as authentic to external stakeholders. It also aligns with Knowles's (1980) principles of andragogy, which describe adult learning as problem-centred, self-directed, and grounded in immediate relevance to professional contexts. For mid-career students, the final strategy document frequently constituted a directly transferable work product. For recent graduates, it served as a portfolio artefact that demonstrated industry-readiness.

Table 2

Indicative Weekly Lesson Content by Module 60 taught weeks across five modules / 12 weeks per module
 | Blended delivery: synchronous Zoom + asynchronous content

Wk	Module	Session Title	Core Content and Learning Activities
1	PLB4000 – Theories & Concepts	Introduction to Place Branding: Origins and Scope	Defining place branding vs destination marketing vs place promotion; historical evolution from Anholt's nation brand index to contemporary participatory models; overview of a structured place-brand diagnostic framework; orientation to the MA community of practice.
2		Brand Image, Identity, Values and Equity	Core brand principles applied to places; the gap between projected identity and perceived image; place equity, emotional resonance, and brand loyalty; case study: a major global city brand (e.g. Copenhagen, Singapore, New York).
3		Nation Branding and Public Diplomacy	Nation branding as soft power and governance tool; the relationship between place branding and public diplomacy; contested national narratives and reputation management; guest speaker from international affairs or nation branding practice.
4		City and Regional Branding	Differentiated approaches for cities, regions, and rural destinations; the role of municipal government in brand governance; scale, institutional coherence, and brand alignment across sub-national territories.
5		Creative Cities, Culture, and Mega-Events	The Creative City thesis (Florida, Landry); culture-led regeneration and the role of the arts; the brand-building function of mega-events (World Cup, Olympics, City of Culture); critical perspectives on cultural commodification and displacement.
6		Tourism, Destination Marketing, and Place Branding	The relationship between DMOs and place brand strategy; destination branding for small cities and rural regions; the tension between tourism promotion and authentic resident identity; inclusive storytelling in destination communication.
7		Economic Development, Inward Investment, and Place Branding	Place branding for trade, talent, and investment attraction; the role of national development agencies and regional investment bodies; managing overlapping audiences and competing brand narratives; case study: an emerging economy nation brand.
8		Cultural Intermediation and Professionalisation	Bourdieu's cultural intermediaries applied to place branding practice; the invisible but consequential work of place branders;

Wk	Module	Session Title	Core Content and Learning Activities
			habitus, social and cultural capital; Warren & Dinnie (2018) on occupational resources and legitimacy; research findings on imposter syndrome in the field.
9		Participatory Place Branding and Stakeholder Management	The participatory turn in place branding scholarship; co-creation and community engagement models; balancing citizen voice with strategic coherence; stakeholder mapping tools and methods; introduction to the Network Constellation framework.
10		Place Branding Futures: Technology, Climate, and Emerging Challenges	Digital place branding and social media; citizen-generated content and narrative control; AI and urban identity; postcolonial rebranding imperatives; climate-driven place transformation and the role of branding in resilience communication.
11		Research Methods for Place Branding	Introduction to ethnographic research and place audit methodology; primary and secondary data sources; academic writing skills workshop; framing and structuring the case study assessment; peer review of draft outlines.
12		Assessment Workshop and Case Study Presentations	Student presentations of formative work; structured peer and tutor feedback; preparation for Assessment 2 final submission; course reflection and intellectual bridge to PLB4001.
1	PLB4001 — Strategy & Implementation	Introduction to Place Brand Strategy and Implementation	The place brand lifecycle — from audit to activation; understanding the strategy–delivery gap; overview of key implementation frameworks; sector contexts (government, tourism, economic development agencies).
2		The Place Brand Audit	Methods for a comprehensive brand audit; primary and secondary research approaches; stakeholder perception surveys and gap analysis; SWOT and competitive analysis frameworks applied to places; data collection planning.
3		Defining Strategic Direction	Translating audit findings into strategic positioning; defining target audiences, core messages, and proof points; the role of evidence in strategic decision-making; case examples of evidence-based positioning.

Wk	Module	Session Title	Core Content and Learning Activities
4		Political and Institutional Contexts	Navigating institutional bureaucracy and political cycles; building internal alignment across government departments; securing senior leadership buy-in; guest speaker: government or public sector brand practitioner.
5		Stakeholder Alignment and Buy-In	Strategies for securing multi-sector commitment; Network Constellation management (Warren & Grigaliūnaitė, 2023); managing conflict between competing stakeholder interests; facilitation and coalition-building skills.
6		Budget, Resourcing, and Governance	Funding models for place branding initiatives; managing agency relationships and procurement; governance structures for brand delivery; briefing creatives and commissioning research in the public sector context.
7		Brand Activation: Channels, Campaigns, and Content	Moving from strategy to execution; channel selection for different audiences; content strategy and editorial planning; earned, owned, and paid media in a place branding context; campaign sequencing and timing.
8		Measuring and Evaluating Place Brands	Frameworks for brand evaluation; perception tracking, brand audits, and longitudinal measurement; measuring ROI in the public sector; reporting to stakeholders and elected decision-makers; accountability and transparency.
9		Challenges in Implementation: Case Studies	Applied analysis of real-world implementation successes and failures; lessons from complex multi-partner brand initiatives; guest speaker from regional development, city government, or destination management.
10		Building Internal Brand Culture	Internal branding and staff engagement; training and capacity-building for brand consistency; sustaining coherence across political transition and leadership change; building brand champions within organisations.
11		Workshop: Implementation Roadmap Development	Studio session for Assessment 2 development; tutor and peer feedback on draft roadmaps; integrating reflective commentary; structuring the phased implementation plan.
12		Assessment Presentations and Cohort Reflection	Oral presentations of implementation roadmaps; structured group debrief;

Wk	Module	Session Title	Core Content and Learning Activities
			thematic synthesis of the cohort's collective learning; intellectual bridge to PLB4002.
1	PLB4002 – Stakeholders & Social Cohesion	Introduction: Place Branding and the Social Contract	Reframing place branding as civic responsibility; the social and political dimensions of identity-making for places; who benefits from place branding? Whose voices are heard? Introduction to critical frameworks.
2		Postcolonial Place Branding	Decolonising place narratives; confronting legacies of colonialism in national and city brands; strategies for Indigenous-led and community-centred rebranding; case studies from the Global South and Indigenous contexts (Canada, New Zealand, South Africa).
3		Social Justice, Equity, and Inclusive Cities	Housing, displacement, and gentrification in branded neighbourhoods; the politics of representation in place brand imagery; whose story is being told and who is left out; principles for equitable place branding.
4		Sustainability and Climate Resilience in Place Branding	Place branding and the green and just transition; communicating climate action and net-zero ambitions; the risks of greenwashing; case studies from cities leading on sustainability narratives (e.g. Copenhagen, Rotterdam, Medellín).
5		Liveability, Wellbeing, and Quality of Life	The shift from competitive to resident-centred place branding; wellbeing indicators as brand proof points; the Happiness Index and Nordic liveability models; East Asian smart city approaches; designing for belonging.
6		Diaspora, Migration, and Belonging	Brands for dispersed communities; migration and its effect on national identity narratives; the role of diaspora in shaping place perceptions abroad; strategies for inclusive branding that speaks to mobile populations.
7		Participatory Methods: Co-Design and Community Engagement	Hands-on introduction to participatory design methods; running effective community consultations; synthesising diverse voices into coherent brand narratives; appreciative inquiry and asset-based approaches.
8		Guest Speaker Session: Equity in Practice	Practitioner-led session on navigating equity challenges in live place branding projects; managing tensions between institutional and community interests; Q&A and structured reflective discussion.

Wk	Module	Session Title	Core Content and Learning Activities
9		Stakeholder Mapping Workshop	Applied stakeholder analysis for Assessment 2; power-interest mapping and salience modelling (Mitchell, Agle & Wood, 1997); identifying underrepresented and marginalised voices; designing an engagement strategy that is genuinely participatory.
10		Conflict, Controversy, and Crisis in Place Branding	Managing reputational crises; contested identities and brand conflict across political divides; rebuilding trust after political upheaval, social rupture, or reputational damage; resilience and brand recovery frameworks.
11		Workshop: Developing the Engagement Plan	Studio session for Assessment 2 development; tutor feedback on draft stakeholder maps and engagement frameworks; refining the inclusive, equity-centred action plan.
12		Symposium: The Ethical Place Brander	Student-led discussion on the ethical commitments and civic responsibilities of place branding practitioners; short presentations of key arguments from Assessment 1 critical briefings; cohort reflection.
1	PLB4003 – Creativity & the Central Idea	Introduction: What is the Central Idea?	The role of the central brand idea in creating strategic coherence; distinguishing between tagline, vision statement, and central creative idea; examples from well-executed place brands; framing Assessment 1 (Brand Position and Vision Statement).
2		Competitive Landscape Analysis	Conducting desk research on comparable and competing places; identifying white space in a competitive brand market; positioning theory applied to places; tools for competitive mapping and differentiation analysis.
3		Brand Positioning and the Value Proposition	Defining and segmenting target audiences; articulating a distinctive and credible positioning statement; the relationship between a place's genuine strengths and external perceptions; evidence-based positioning.
4		Brand Architecture and Identity Systems	Brand hierarchy in multi-layered place contexts; primary, secondary, and sub-brand relationships; governance of visual and verbal identity in the public sector; case examples of city and regional brand architecture.

Wk	Module	Session Title	Core Content and Learning Activities
5		Visual Identity and Design Principles	Introduction to design thinking applied to place brands; typography, colour, imagery, symbol, and form in place brand identity; how to brief and evaluate design agency work; critical analysis of visual identity systems from global city brands.
6		Language, Tone, and Narrative Voice	The role of language and tone in place brand identity; writing tone-of-voice guides; adapting language for different audiences and channels; storytelling and narrative architecture as strategic tools in place communication.
7		The Pitch: Persuasion, Presentation, and Stakeholder Communication	How to structure and deliver a persuasive brand idea pitch to internal stakeholders; the art of strategic storytelling; using visual aids and narrative arc effectively; preparation and rehearsal for Assessment 2 live pitch sessions.
8		Assessment 2: Live Pitch Sessions	Student pitch presentations to a simulated internal stakeholder panel (tutor + peers in role); structured immediate feedback from panel and peers; critical reflection on persuasive communication and strategic framing.
9		From Strategy to Document: The Brand Bible	What constitutes a comprehensive brand strategy and visual identity document; structure, visual presentation, and professional tone; case examples from FutureBrand, Wolff Olins, and leading municipal brand guides; preparing for Assessment 3.
10		Phased Implementation and Touchpoint Planning	Prioritising brand touchpoints for maximum early impact; planning phased rollouts aligned with budget cycles and political realities; designing a realistic activation timeline; connecting strategy to operational delivery.
11		Workshop: Brand Document Development	Studio session for Assessment 3; tutor and peer review of draft brand strategy documents; visual feedback on identity components; refining the brand architecture and implementation plan.
12		Showcase: Brand Strategy Presentations	Formal presentation of Assessment 3 brand strategy and visual identity documents to the cohort; celebratory critique; collective reflection on creative and strategic development across the module.
1	PLB4004 — Research	Introduction to Research in Place	What counts as rigorous research in an interdisciplinary professional field? The

Wk	Module	Session Title	Core Content and Learning Activities
	Methods & Major Project	Branding	spectrum from traditional academic dissertation to practice-based major project; overview of the module structure, supervision process, and dissertation/project pathway options.
2		Research Design: Paradigms and Approaches	Ontology and epistemology made accessible to applied researchers; qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods approaches; case study research methodology; action research and practice inquiry as legitimate scholarly approaches in professional fields.
3		Literature Reviews and Theoretical Frameworks	How to build a systematic and analytical literature review; identify gaps, debates, and theoretical anchors in place branding scholarship; construct a conceptual framework; and scope and manage bibliographic databases.
4		Research Ethics and Professional Responsibility	Navigating the university ethics approval process; informed consent and participant rights; data protection and GDPR compliance; specific ethical considerations when researching communities, governments, and practitioners in place-branding contexts.
5		Primary Research Methods: Interviews, Focus Groups, Surveys	Designing qualitative instruments for place branding research; purposive and snowball sampling strategies; conducting and recording semi-structured interviews; running focus groups; thematic analysis frameworks for qualitative data.
6		Research Proposal Workshop	Structured workshop for Assessment 1 (Research Proposal) development; individual and small-group tutorials; peer feedback on research questions, methodological choices, and ethical frameworks; finalising the proposal structure.
7		Practice-Based Research: The Major Project Pathway	For students pursuing a professional project rather than a traditional dissertation: brief development and project scoping; managing client or stakeholder relationships in practice-based research; frameworks for evaluating and presenting practice-based outcomes as scholarly inquiry.
8		Data Analysis and Interpretation	Approaches to qualitative data analysis (thematic, narrative, discourse); coding frameworks and analytical memo-writing; working with secondary data and

Wk	Module	Session Title	Core Content and Learning Activities
			documentary evidence; using visual and spatial data in place branding research.
9		Writing the Dissertation / Major Project	Structure, voice, and argument in extended academic writing; integrating theory and practice without losing analytical coherence; maintaining a clear argument at length; writing for dual audiences (academic peers and practitioner communities).
10		Supervision and Peer Review Session	Individual progress tutorials with supervisors; peer accountability groups for mid-point review; troubleshooting methodological and analytical challenges; strategies for managing the extended writing process.
11		Communicating Research: Dissemination and Impact	Writing and presenting research for publication; adapting academic findings for practitioner audiences; contribution to field development as a professional obligation; identifying relevant conference and journal opportunities in place branding research.
12		Final Presentations and Programme Reflection	Formative presentations of dissertation/major project progress to the cohort; collective reflection on the MA journey and professional development; celebrating the community of practice that has formed; orientation to post-graduation CPD and continuing professional development.

4.3 Community of Practice and Cross-Generational Learning

The inaugural cohort of eleven students formed an intentionally designed cross-generational learning community (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). Roughly half were mid- or senior-level professionals working in government, cultural institutions, or place-based consultancies across several continents. The other half were recent graduates from the undergraduate advertising, public relations and branding degree at the same university, many of whom had taken the undergraduate place branding module and had chosen postgraduate specialisation.

This diversity generated a productive dynamic that a more homogeneous cohort could not have produced. Professionals brought immediate contextual application. Week by week, they described how the module's frameworks, including stakeholder auditing, brand narrative construction, and systems mapping, were being deployed in their day-to-day professional contexts. Recent graduates brought inquiry, theoretical engagement, and creative energy. The mutual challenge and accountability that emerged constituted the kind of community of practice that Wenger (1998) describes: a group united by

a shared domain, mutual engagement in practice, and a developing repertoire of knowledge, tools, and analytical language.

The programme's online structure supported global participation through weekly live sessions supplemented by asynchronous pre- and post-class content, expert lectures, and collaborative workshops. Students joined from Canada, the United Kingdom, continental Europe, Vietnam, Ghana, South Africa, and other contexts, contributing a pluralistic perspective on how place branding principles operate and are resisted across different governance cultures. Nearly twenty guest speakers from industry and academia contributed to the inaugural syllabus, among them representatives from leading global branding consultancies, municipal brand strategists, destination-management practitioners specialising in Indigenous tourism and inclusive storytelling, and policy officials from city governments across several regions. This integration of practitioner knowledge with academic content operationalised the situated cognition model (Brown, Collins, and Duguid 1989), in which learning is most powerful when it occurs in context and through application to meaningful problems.

5. Stakeholder Relevance and the Civic Value of Place Branding Education

The MA in Place Branding was never conceived as a narrowly disciplinary academic programme. From the outset it was designed to generate demonstrable value for the sectors in which its graduates would work, including government, tourism, cultural policy, and economic development. The distinction the programme sought to make was between upskilling as a functional outcome and education as a civic investment. Consistent with the field's governance turn, the argument was that skilled, reflective, and ethically grounded place branders contribute directly to the quality of public decision-making, stakeholder engagement, and place identity formation.

This argument was borne out in the cohort's engagement. In reflective learning journals and live sessions, professional students described how programme content had enabled them to articulate the strategic significance of place branding to senior decision-makers who had previously understood it only as promotional activity. Several described using the frameworks developed in the programme to reframe internal policy discussions, shifting conversations from logomarks and slogans towards stakeholder alignment, values-based narrative, and long-term identity governance. This outcome speaks to a recognised need in the field. As place branding has taken on greater governance responsibility, the practitioners delivering it require a depth of conceptual understanding that informal professional development cannot reliably provide (Eshuis and Edwards 2013; Warren and Dinnie 2018).

The programme also modelled a distinctive form of sector bridging. The cohort's geographical and professional diversity spanned urban planning, marketing, media, diplomacy, and municipal government across several continents, creating a cross-sectoral learning environment. Students interrogated how place branding principles were implemented, adapted, and contested in varying governance cultures, drawing comparative insights that neither a purely academic nor a purely practitioner-based programme

could have generated. This cross-fertilisation of sector knowledge and lived professional experience is itself a model for how place branding education can contribute to the field's maturation as both a scholarly discipline and a professional practice.

While this study offers an account of the programme's design and outcomes, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations. First, the inaugural cohort of 11 students, while rich in cross-sectoral experience, constitutes a modest evidence base from which to draw broad conclusions. Second, the autoethnographic nature of the inquiry, conducted by the programme's designer, introduces the risk of self-justification, necessitating the critical reflexivity employed throughout this analysis. Acknowledging these tensions is crucial for validating the findings and invites further longitudinal research into the long-term impact of such educational interventions.

6. Structural Challenges: UK Higher Education and the Conditions for Innovation

6.1 Systemic Pressures on Postgraduate Provision

The MA in Place Branding launched into a UK higher education sector experiencing acute and compounding structural pressures. The formal withdrawal from the Erasmus+ mobility programme following Brexit significantly reduced inbound student flows from European Union member states. This particularly affected post-1992 universities such as the one in question, which had previously attracted strong cohorts of EU students under mobility agreements. At the same time, changes to the immigration rules for international students, including the removal of dependent visa rights that had been a significant factor in recruitment from markets such as Nigeria and India, redirected prospective postgraduate students towards competitor destinations with more accessible entry conditions, among them Canada, Ireland, Germany, and the Netherlands (McGettigan 2023; Universities UK 2024).

The domestic funding context compounded these pressures. UK universities had operated under a capped undergraduate tuition fee structure since 2012, and after a decade of inflation, those fees represented a declining real-terms income. Postgraduate provision is not subject to the same regulatory cap, but its financial logic is similar. In a context of squeezed institutional margins, the short-term return-on-investment calculation for new programmes favours established, high-demand subjects over interdisciplinary innovations with longer market-building timelines, and it does so most sharply for emerging, low-search-volume fields.

The removal of student-number controls at selective universities after 2015 had a further indirect effect. As research-intensive institutions expanded undergraduate intake, post-1992 universities faced intensified competition for domestic students across subject areas. In this environment, the institutional risk appetite for new programme development declined, and programmes came to be evaluated increasingly by near-term enrolment metrics rather than by longer-term academic or societal impact.

6.2 Marketing a New Discipline Without Institutional Support

The programme's first year saw an enrolment of 11 students, a figure that, in any established disciplinary field, would represent a creditable inaugural cohort. Place branding, however, lacks the search identity and institutional recognition of established academic subjects. Prospective students cannot easily find it through conventional disciplinary channels, and many who would benefit from such a programme do not yet identify themselves as potential place branding postgraduates. Effective recruitment for a programme of this kind requires sustained investment in content marketing, professional network engagement, and partnership with industry associations, investment that was not provided.

All promotional activity was conducted by the programme leader alone, through organic professional networking, conference presentations, and partnership with sector media outlets and professional networks. These channels reached motivated and well-qualified applicants, but they could not substitute for the digital marketing infrastructure, enrolment agent relationships, and institutional brand support that are standard in competitive postgraduate recruitment. This resourcing gap is not unique to this case. It reflects a systemic problem in the way UK universities incubate new programmes in emerging fields, which require more than one cycle to establish market visibility and a word-of-mouth reputation.

6.3 Lessons for Interdisciplinary Programme Development

Three structural lessons emerge from this experience with implications beyond this specific case. First, programmes in emergent interdisciplinary fields cannot be assessed against the enrolment benchmarks of established disciplines. The legitimate peripheral participation that characterises entry into any new professional field (Lave and Wenger 1991) applies equally to prospective students entering a field they are still learning to name and value. Building a market for such a programme requires multi-year investment and institutional patience.

Second, professionalising a field, by developing shared knowledge frameworks, ethical standards, and recognised educational pathways, requires active institutional advocacy rather than academic validation alone. Place branding, like other hybrid governance domains such as cultural diplomacy and urban innovation, sits between established disciplinary categories, and it is therefore vulnerable to deprioritisation precisely because it resists easy classification.

Third, the intellectual and pedagogical capital developed in programmes such as this one does not disappear when the programme closes. The frameworks, assessment designs, and community structures created for the MA in Place Branding have continued to inform practice through ongoing academic leadership in the field, through the development of a practitioner-focused CPD platform, and through the professional trajectories of the graduates themselves. The discontinuation of the programme is evidence not of its failure but of a structural environment insufficiently equipped to support slow-growth, high-impact educational ventures in emerging fields.

7. The Future of Place Branding Education

7.1 Towards a Professional Competency Framework

For place branding education to develop with the rigour the field requires, it needs a shared foundation: a clearly articulated competency framework that identifies the knowledge, skills, and ethical commitments a qualified place branding practitioner should possess. Such a framework would serve as both a curriculum design reference and a standard against which professional development offerings, including short courses, micro-credentials, and continuing professional development pathways, could be benchmarked.

The MA in Place Branding proposed one model for this foundation, based on five core competencies that are essential for the professional practitioner:

1. **Theoretical Literacy:** A deep understanding of place branding scholarship and its allied interdisciplinary fields.
2. **Stakeholder Systems Management:** The capacity to map, navigate, and engage complex multi-sector stakeholder environments.
3. **Strategic Brand Design:** Fluency in developing brand strategy, visual identity, and creative narrative.
4. **Evidence-Based Practice:** A grounded approach to research, data analysis, and strategy implementation.
5. **Ethical Stewardship:** An enduring commitment to inclusivity, representation, and the long-term governance of place identity.

These competencies align with the field's governance turn and the broader demands that public-sector employers place on strategic communications professionals (Eshuis and Edwards 2013; Kavaratzis, Zenker, and Warnaby 2020).

Developing such a framework would require cross-sector collaboration among universities, professional bodies such as the International Place Branding Association, consultancies, and public-sector employers. No single institution can complete the task alone, but a dedicated postgraduate programme is well positioned to initiate it and to test it through live pedagogical practice.

7.2 Modular and Hybrid Provision

The structural conditions of UK higher education, combined with the dispersed professional geography of potential place branding students, who are located across sectors and continents, point to the value of more flexible, modular models of provision. Micro-credentials and stackable learning pathways, in which short and targeted courses accumulate towards a larger qualification, have attracted significant interest across the sector as a mechanism for extending higher education's reach to working professionals (Universities UK 2024).

For place branding, this model has particular appeal. The field's practitioners are rarely in a position to pause their careers for full-time study, and the global distribution of relevant professional experience makes synchronous cohort-based programmes difficult to sustain without online infrastructure. Some private offerings already attempt to meet demand through this modular approach, using accredited short courses or small online cohorts that embed the reflective, community-based learning principles of the university environment in a format accessible to working professionals across time zones and career stages.

Private provision of this kind cannot replace the epistemic authority, critical rigour, and quality assurance that formal university programmes offer. The most effective future model for place branding education is likely to be a hybrid ecosystem in which university-validated programmes, whether MA degrees, executive programmes, or credit-bearing certificates, sit at the apex of a broader learning infrastructure that also includes industry-delivered continuing professional development, peer networks, and practitioner-led knowledge exchange. Each component serves a distinct function, and none can substitute for the others.

7.3 Global Relevance and Equitable Access

Any future model for place branding education must take the global distribution of the field's most pressing challenges and its most engaged practitioners seriously. Post-industrial regeneration, postcolonial rebranding, climate resilience, and social cohesion are not uniquely Western problems. They are the defining place challenges of the era, experienced with particular urgency in the Global South, in rapidly urbanising economies, and in communities navigating transitions that no established branding template adequately addresses. An education ecosystem accessible only to those who can afford UK or European tuition fees, or who can take extended leave from professional roles, will systematically exclude the practitioners and places that most need its insights.

The online and globally distributed model piloted by the MA in Place Branding, which brought students from six continents into a common online learning community, demonstrated that this accessibility is achievable without sacrificing pedagogical depth. What it requires is institutional commitment to flexible delivery, authentic assessment designs that are portable across professional contexts, and genuine investment in the community-building infrastructure through which cross-cultural learning occurs.

8. Conclusion

The MA in Place Branding was an ambitious and timely educational intervention. As the first postgraduate programme in the field, it demonstrated that place branding can sustain rigorous academic study at postgraduate level, that its theoretical foundations in cultural intermediation, stakeholder theory, and systems thinking are rich enough to structure a coherent and demanding curriculum, and that the practitioners and emerging professionals who enrolled were able to integrate academic rigour with professional application in ways that generated immediate and lasting value.

The programme also demonstrated a less comfortable truth: that educational innovation in emerging fields is structurally precarious in the current UK higher education environment. The conditions that constrained its sustainability, including demographic and policy shifts in student recruitment, under-resourced programme marketing, and the absence of multi-year institutional commitment, are not idiosyncratic to this case. They are symptomatic of a funding model that has reduced universities' capacity to make the patient, high-conviction commitments that field-building educational innovation requires.

The argument of this paper is that professionalising place branding, as a discipline, a practice, and a civic function, depends on the development of dedicated, rigorous, and ethically grounded educational provision. Practitioners equipped to understand the conceptual complexity of place identity, to navigate multi-stakeholder governance environments, to design inclusive and evidence-informed strategies, and to account critically for the symbolic power they exercise are not only better professionals. They are better civic actors, and the places they serve are better served.

The implications for practice follow directly. Universities and their partners should treat competency frameworks, portable authentic assessment, and multi-year incubation not as optional refinements but as the operating conditions for the viable provision of education in emerging professional fields. The MA in Place Branding was a prototype. Its intellectual and pedagogical legacy continues, and this paper has sought to document it not as an institutional achievement but as a contribution to an ongoing conversation about what it means to educate for the complex, contested, and consequential work of branding places. The field is ready for that provision. Whether the institutions that could support it are prepared to make the commitment remains an open question.

Declarations

Author Contribution

Sole author, researcher, editor.

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