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**Angelika Pabian**

The University of Dąbrowa Górnicza  
The Faculty of Applied Sciences  
e-mail: apabian@wsb.edu.pl  
phone 32 295 93 66

## **Factors Affecting the Image of University in the Eyes of Students-Clients**

***Abstract.** The paper is based on an original research endeavor carried out in 2014 and looking into the evolution of Polish higher education institutions as they strive to adapt to market economy. It specifically addresses the issue of university branding and the determinants of university image in the eyes of students. The discussion of factors relevant to the process of university image building is framed around rankings based on empirical data. These data may be an important source of information for competing universities.*

***Keywords:** student-client, image, branding, determinants of university image*

### **Introduction**

Polish higher education institutions operate on an imperfect market characterized by high barriers to entry, poor transparency, and a large diversity of products available [Jabłońska 1999: 98]. Further, it is a dual market, actually composed of two interdependent sub-markets: that of public higher education (also referred to as non-paid higher education) and that of commercial higher education (also known as paid higher education). Interestingly, this division does not coincide with the ownership structure in the higher education sector, viz. with the distinction into public (state) and private (non-state) institutions.

It is because both types of institutions are present, albeit to a different extent, in both the sub-markets.

From a marketing viewpoint, the higher education market is in its mature phase. Higher education institutions respond to opportunities and threats from their environment, which is reflected in changes to their *modus operandi*, supported by strategies developed around educational, scientific and financial objectives. Activities undertaken by higher education institutions are validated by the market (students, alumni, research and teaching staff, labor market actors, competitors, etc.). What becomes more and more important is therefore a proactive approach toward image/reputation and brand management that makes it possible for a university to overcome amorphousness, differentiate itself, and compete in the increasingly challenging higher education market.

This paper aims primarily to demonstrate how relevant it is today for a university to build a reputation and to exemplify such differentiators of institutional identity that would appeal to university stakeholders, i.e. students. An overview of definitions of image and brand will provide a context for a presentation of survey findings and the ensuing discussion of the key characteristics of students as higher education clients.

## 1. Student as an actor in the higher education market

As a result of the revolutionary changes that took place in the higher education sector in the early 1990s, a distinct higher education market emerged, and students began to be perceived as customers. In the wake of the economic transformation, the student became a conscious and active market player making thoughtful and rational decisions. However, the embracement of marketing principles by universities had its far-reaching implications, raising fears about the changes that might follow. The list of likely dangers to academic values and traditions included the so called McDonaldization, downgrading universities to the role of an educational service provider and reducing higher education to a fast consumer good where the student-consumer obtains a degree against a payment [Mok 1999: 117-127].

The multiple controversies over perceiving students in terms of a marketing consumer have fueled a debate. Apparently, a particularly cogent commentary was contributed by Michael J. Armstrong, who proposed to differentiate between “clients” and “customers” and argued that higher education students should be treated as clients rather customers [Armstrong 2003: 372]. The term “client” denotes an individual or business that needs professional assistance in the service delivery process. This definition clearly relates to professional services, whose clients lack expert knowledge and therefore have to rely, to a large extent, on the

expertise of professionals. The latter have a substantial influence on the needs and expectations of clients toward services offered. It seems to come as a matter of course then that preferences, tastes and resulting educational needs should only be satisfied as long as they are not in conflict with the mission of higher education institutions. A similar outlook is advocated by Mete Sirvanci, who warns against designating a student as a customer (buyer), and Randal S. Franz, who underscores the role of education that should not be seen as something tantamount to packaging and delivering knowledge to a passive student. Instead, Franz describes a higher education student as an actor, or active participant, being an integral part of the educational process [Sirvanci 1996: 99-100; Franz 1998: 63].

Fundamental differences between defining a student as a client and as a buyer are pointed out in literature [Sirvanci 1996: 99-100]. These include:

– **freedom of choice** – there are no restrictions whatsoever on access to goods and services. This is the case when businesses do not discriminate between their clients and place no constraints on their ability to purchase goods and services. This does not apply, however, to higher education institutions as they are not accessible to all potential students. To be admitted, a candidate must have a specified grade-point average as well as certain other prerequisites. Only candidates that meet these requirements are thus considered eligible for higher education services.

– **responsibility for paying the price** – customers pay for products and services, which implies that the spending is funded by themselves. It does not have to be the case with higher education, however, since it is possible to use financial assistance (scholarships, student loans) or parents' money to cover tuition expenses. In addition, free educational services, e.g. government- or EU-funded, are available.

– **requirements to prove merit and eligibility** – in the world of business, it is unthinkable to have customers take tests or examinations to prove their merit and eligibility to purchase a product. Yet, students are assessed all the time in order to verify their learning. To complete a term and be promoted to the next, a student needs to be credited by dean based on a number of partial assessments, otherwise the credit is conditional or refused to the effect that the student has to repeat a term.

An active stance taken by many students today may stem from their demographic and socio-economic background as well as from the factors driving their decisions to choose a particular higher education institution. Grażyna Światowy contends that higher education students can be divided into several groups with distinct characteristics related to their commitment to the education process and to self-development. Under that distinction, the student community comprises the following types: prudent conqueror, defiant individualist, submissive conformist, last chance strategist, and learning-resistant student [Światowy 2004: 140-143].

At the same time, Philip Kotler and Karen Fox distinguish five groups of higher education students: social improvement learners, learning/career learners, leisure/status learners, submissive learners, and ambivalent learners [Kotler, Fox 1995: 219 cited in Hall 2007: 110].

Each of those groups has distinct expectations toward an education product, hence seeking a different higher education institution emphasizing different identity features and touting different values – from functionality, to experiential and symbolic values, to affordability. Consequently, university image management is a challenge that involves a multitude of studies and analyses. Active and conscious market participants, such as higher education students, have some clearly defined requirements and do not find it difficult to rank factors influencing their positive perception of a higher education institution.

## 2. University brand and image

A higher education institution can be said to be characterized by prestige, good reputation, high esteem, or renown (e.g. Yale University, Cambridge University, Jagiellonian University). As access to higher education became common and the unique higher education market emerged, a number of new terms came into usage including university brand or image.

There are important correlations between university brand, image and mission. Mission, being a verbal expression of university identity, should, alike brand, promulgate coherent values producing a certain image in stakeholders' minds (cf. Fig. 1) [Iwankiewicz-Rak, Shulgina 2013: 39].

By definition, a university's mission points to is indicative of the object of its activities, its goals, and the ways these goals are to be achieved. Understandably, a mission statement is not static, but it should be validated, refined and updated to account for changes taking place inside and outside the institution" [Iwankiewicz-Rak, Shulgina 2013: 33]. Mission statements will reflect, and comply with, the regulatory framework outlining its powers and responsibilities and laying down its operating rules. The mission should be communicated to internal as well as external stakeholders in order to broadcast the values that the university intends to foster, as these values will influence its perception and hence contribute to building a specific image of the institution.

A university's mission is directly related to its brand, particularly to its verbal (name) and non-verbal portion (logo/emblem). The logo, being an element of corporate visual identity, represents an institution's differentiator (anchor of identity) [Altkorn 2004: 43], evoking the identity features and values that are set forth in the mission statement. In literature, **brand** is defined very broadly. Jerzy Altkorn,

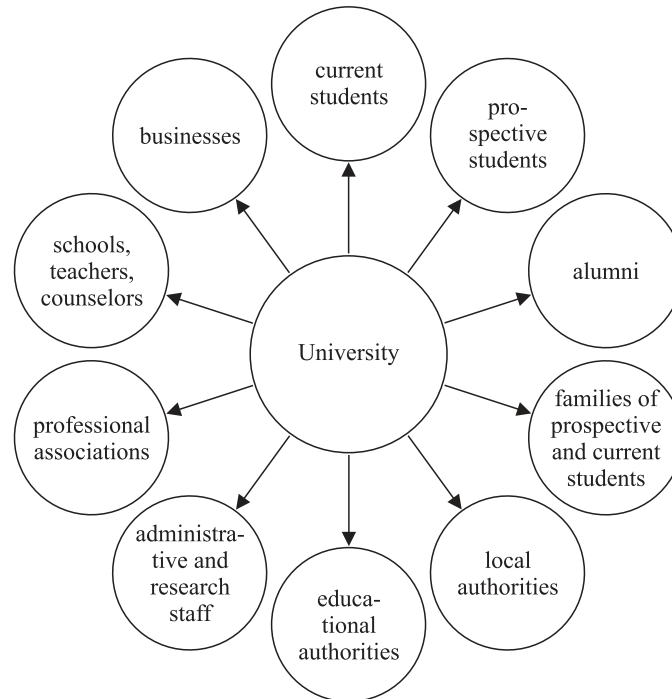


Figure 1. University stakeholders

Source: Payne 1997: 201.

for example, describes it as “a name, idea, symbol, inscription, pattern, or a combination of these, a color composition, tune, or a blend of all these components, used to differentiate a given product from those of competitors” [Altkorn 2001: 151]. Maciej Dębski has it that “brand is a complex combination of symbols, while the most lasting of all brand differentiators are value, culture, and personality” [Dębski 2009: 13].

The identity of a higher education institution, through its component brand differentiators, is supposed to create a specific picture, or image, of the institution. The resulting **image** is “a model, epitome, impression, picture” [Słownik współczesnego języka polskiego 1996, cf. Altkorn 2004: 14] crafted in the minds of all individuals and organizations that are directly or indirectly related to the institution. However, university identity can never be truly reflected in its image. Image can be said to represent a “holistic, subjective notion that an individual (e.g. student) has about an object. It arises as a result of deliberate communication measures centered on the object, conveying its true characteristics as well as

elements of the desired picture” [Dąbrowski 2013: 10]. It is an undisputed fact that university image is an aggregate product of stakeholders’ own experiences, popular beliefs, value systems, and even individual expectations. Image may vary and evolve with the kind and amount of information that the recipient has at a particular moment, hence so much weight attached to the communication policy pursued by an institution, and the communication tools and media that it employs [Białoskurski 2014: 32; Dudek-Mańkowska, Balkiewicz-Żerek 2015: 14, 22]. Although most higher education institutions still tend to rely on traditional media (e.g. the radio), increasingly higher priority is given to social media, such as Facebook, YouTube, etc.<sup>1</sup>

What is therefore at the heart of the **branding** process (forming a brand image) is accentuating the right values. The question arises: what values should be promoted by those who seek to differentiate themselves in the market while at the same time creating a positive institutional image? The question was answered e.g. by a survey involving students of Polish higher education institutions.

### 3. Determinants of university image in the light of the author’s original research

Publications dedicated to higher education sector marketing and reflecting on university image or brand started coming out as the number of higher education institutions grew and a distinct higher education market emerged. Mass consumption of higher education products forced higher education institutions to adopt management styles prevalent in business. University image and brand management became important on the recent decline in the university-aged population accompanied by an undiminishing number of higher education institutions. It is presumed that higher education institutions will therefore intensify competitive behaviors and resort to a variety methods to mobilize social trust, engaging e.g. in branding. The increasing relevance of image and brand management has stimulated research on the adjustment of Polish higher education institutions to the realities of market economy. Some of the surveys included questions inquiring into university image.

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<sup>1</sup> Originally, the underlying idea behind social media was to facilitate and support the development of social links. Over time, they have also become a communication platform for lots of organizations and their stakeholders. The most popular social networking site is Facebook. In 2015, it boasted 1.5 billion users, while the other top site YouTube had slightly over 1 million users. Social media have been growing rapidly as a result of social and cultural transformations and advances in information technology, especially that a fanpage or channel has a global outreach and costs relatively little to run. For a broader discussion, see: Bartosik-Purgat 2016; Tarka 2013.

In an image building process, a vital role is played by endogenic factors associated with the higher education institution itself, such as message content, including the institutional values and strengths that are highlighted, and the supporting visual identity system. What matters just as well is the selection of communication tools and media. Besides factors associated with the higher education institution whose picture is to be molded, branding importantly involves endogenic factors relating to message recipients (university stakeholders). The research whose outcomes are discussed in the paper was focused on factors linked to the activities of a university as an organization that were assessed by two groups of respondents – university research and teaching staff, and university students – through the lens of their own value systems and experiences.

The survey was performed between April and July 2014 and was designed to supply empirical data for use in a doctoral dissertation on the market orientedness of Polish higher education institutions. The questionnaire-based method of data acquisition was chosen for the survey. Recognizing the fact that the Web had become a major medium of communication, an online approach was adopted. Among the many advantages to conducting a direct survey online, the most appreciated ones are interactivity and global reach. Additional benefits are that the survey can be carried out at a lower cost, compared to traditional techniques, and completed in a relatively short time. Moreover, modern technologies make it possible to automate the recording and storage of data. Invitations to participate in the survey were e-mailed to rectors of Polish higher education institutions, along with a link to the e-questionnaire and a request to further circulate them among students and staff. More requests were distributed through social media. Since a suitable data base was not available, it was not possible to use random sampling, therefore non-probability sampling was used. Compared to random sampling, this method has several unquestionable strengths including, in the first place, a much lower cost to do research, feasibility to reach a clearly defined portion of the population even in the absence of a sampling frame – which was actually the case with the reported survey – and to conduct research on the target segment. Nevertheless, non-probability sampling has its weaknesses, too. Most importantly, the extent to which the findings are representative is difficult to determine and demonstrably inferior to those obtained from random samples. In total, the online questionnaire was completed by 938 respondents (including 301 students).

In the survey on the market orientation of higher education institutions, the respondents were asked to indicate and evaluate factors that, in their opinion, can influence university image. The respondents plotted their views on a matrix comprising a list of hypothetical factors that may be relevant to the branding process. The matrix was built around the proposition that higher education institutions are organizations operating in the higher education market and making use of marketing principles. Given the complexity of professional services marketing, it was



assumed that factors determining university image would represent seven categories – an extended set based on the marketing mix concept. The categories were as follows: product, price, promotion, distribution, people, process, and physical environment [Boguszewicz-Kreft 2006: 25]. Since the list of factors included in the survey was not of a closed-end type, the respondents were allowed to add items and then provide their evaluations. However, this option was not exercised at all.

The factors were arranged alphabetically so that their order could not be interpreted as suggestive of their significance. The responses were used to rank the factors (Chart 1). The survey respondents were therefore requested to rate the listed items in a 5-point scale where the rate 5 stood for “most significant” and 1 for “least significant.” In effect, a body of source data was collected that made it possible to build a ranking of the most relevant factors affecting the image of a higher education institution in the eyes of its stakeholders. The overall ranking was compiled using the grade-point scoring method. The procedure involved the following steps:

1) adding up responses pointing to a factor as relevant to university image building, and computing percentages for each such factor (only “highly significant” and “significant” evaluations were included in ranking these),

2) calculating a sum-total of the products of multiplying the percentages in each evaluation category (based on the list of factors) by their weights (a weight of 1.5 was adopted for evaluations in the category “highly significant” and a weight of 1 for the category “significant”), using the following formula:

$$x_{bw} \times 1.5 + x_w \times 1 = \text{ranking total},$$

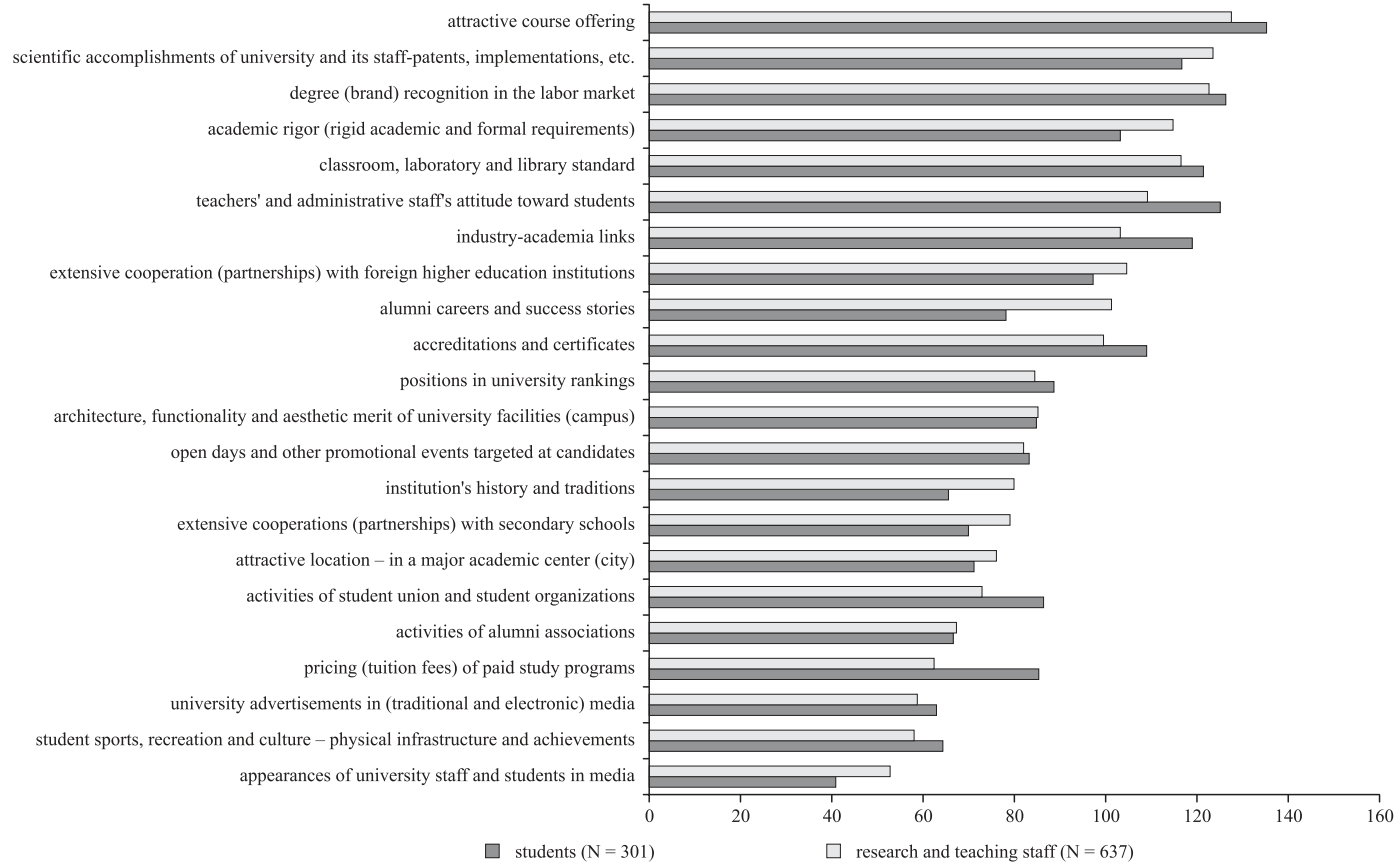
$x_{bw}$  – value reflecting the percentage of responses in the category “highly significant”,  
 $x_w$  – value representing the percentage of responses in the category “significant”,

3) making a ranking by arranging the corresponding elements by the value of a specific variable – the ranking total (the research and teaching staff ranking was assume adopt held up as the primary or master list, while the student ranking – as the secondary or reference list),

4) computing the differential between the ranking totals for specific factors affecting university image among research and teaching staff (p) and among students (s), to help analyze the final ranking.

Given the fact that students were treated in the survey as participants of a market where a professional service is offered and clients rely on the expertise of professionals (i.e. lecturers), the survey involved students alongside research and teaching staff. Hence, the way that the findings are delivered in the following section of the paper will be by juxtaposing the opinions of staff against those of the student community.

Chart 1. Ranking of factors affecting university image based on respondent opinions



Source: own based on an original questionnaire survey.

The respondents were unanimous in picking the factors that were the most and the least relevant to university image building, with attractive course offerings topping the list and staff and student appearances in the media lagging behind all other factors. They were also agreed about the relevance of such factors as classroom, laboratory and library standard (fourth place), attractive geographical location (sixteenth place), and activity of alumni organizations (eighteenth place). Both the respondent groups attached marginal importance to such factors as student sports, recreation and culture, or university advertisements in the media.

In the staff ranking, six of the factors that were considered the most relevant were related to course offerings, in the broadest sense, and to student facilities. Other top-ranked factors were centered on cooperation with stakeholders and partners. Lower rated factors included those strongly associated with university image, whether founded on institutional experience and tradition or on certificates, accreditations or positions in university rankings. Factors indicative of physical infrastructure and university campus were also placed in this category. The next two factors were focused on campus community – the seventeenth and the eighteenth place were taken by activities pursued by student and alumni organizations. At the bottom of the ranking list are found factors corresponding to marketing mix components, including price, advertising, marketing communications, and complementary or non-curricular add-ons (sports, recreation, etc.).

Many student responses and evaluations diverge from those provided by university staff. The differences may be classified as slight (+/- 1 or 2 positions), significant (+/- 3 or 4 positions), or large (+/- 5 or more positions). Slight differences are found in the case of such factors as: degree recognition (placed lower in the staff survey); open days and other promotional events (rated lower in the student survey); university advertisements in the media (positioned lower in the student survey); student sports, recreation and culture (a lower position in the staff survey); cooperation with foreign higher education institutions (a lower place in the student survey); campus (a lower position in the student survey); positions in university rankings (a lower rating in the staff survey); and cooperation with secondary schools (rated lower in the student ranking). Two of these factors were perceived by students as more relevant than by university staff (degree recognition and student life). A higher place given by students to brand perception indicates that they gauge the relevance of factors influencing university image from the perspective of alumni careers and their employability. This respondent group also places a greater value on such factors as student sports, recreation and culture, even though in the overall ranking the relevance of this factor appears negligible. This is due to the fact that activities other than study do matter if they can have an effect on a student's personal development (e.g. sports, including the activity of AZS [Academic Sports Association]). The factors whose evaluations differed more markedly between the respondent groups were as follows: academic rigor

(rated lower in the student survey); teachers' and administrative staff's attitude toward students (positioned lower in the staff ranking); industry-academia links (a lower place in the staff survey); accreditations and certificates (a lower position in the staff survey); scientific accomplishments of university and its staff (placed lower in the student ranking). While rigor tends to be perceived by faculty as a fundamental ingredient of the instruction process, students will rather appreciate student-friendly attitudes, even such attitudes are often seen as an antonym of order and compliance with requirements imposed by teachers. Conversely, university staff are likely to regard academic rigor as a key prerequisite of quality instruction. Clearly, the two respondent groups have divergent views of what studying is about. Where research and teaching staff will mostly cherish the "old-school" approach to the instruction process, students believe in progressive values, which means that they put most emphasis on minimizing the time and effort that it takes to earn a degree. For most students, the choice of university is driven by the expected market value of their education. Therefore, they discern that the choice of a university maintaining strong links with business enables its students to attend workshops, take part in study visits, and acquire hands-on experience, thus increasing their employability on graduation. It should be stressed as well that university staff find it very important that their institution has notable attainments in science. Excellence in research not only defines showcases demonstrates staff accomplishments but it also defines demonstrates determines the research performance and economic potential of the institution (implementations, patents). Students considered this factor slightly less relevant and gave it sixth place. The following factors were characterized by most salient differences in evaluations by students and staff: institution's history and traditions (ranked lower by students); alumni success stories (rated lower by students); activities of student unions and student organizations (a lower rank in the staff survey); and tuition fees (a lower position in the staff survey). Some of the differences were very pronounced. While institutional history and traditions were ranked fourteenth in the staff survey, students placed it near the end of the second ten of the ranking. Similarly, alumni success stories were rated by university staff as much more relevant to university image. An inverse relationship could be observed in the case of student unions and organizations (a six-place gap) and for tuitions fees (a seven-place disparity).

Contrary to what could be expected, advertising and media appearances of staff and students did not take a prominent place among factors affecting university image in the rankings compiled for the two respondent groups. Alumni associations were another factor that was rated low by the students and staff surveyed. Instead, the respondents seemed more focused on factors connected with the educational product, recognizing the relevance of attractive course offerings and curriculum design or the market value of the degree. It could therefore be stated that it is to a limited extent only that the opinions revealed by the survey reflect

the composition of a typical set of marketing instruments. The sole factor of this sort that was positioned high in the ranking was attractive course offerings that could be regarded in terms of products marketed by higher education institutions. Much emphasis was also placed on linkage between the value of the degree and the employability rate. Other marketing instruments were underrated by the respondents vis-à-vis their preception from a marketing perspective.

What has to be highlighted in summarizing the findings of the survey aimed at identifying the relative relevance of factors affecting university image is that an active approach to university image building and institutional brand management is critical. The discussion of the rankings of factors influencing university image demonstrates that precedence is given to factors relating to course offerings, the market value of the degree, and the insitutional research and economic potential. This leads to the conclusion that higher education institutions, while seeking to exploit the business opportunities inherent in their market presence, downplay other marketing instruments, notably communications and public relations.

## **Conclusion**

The higher education market is no longer a national playground but has grown European or even global and is now governed by the same rules that apply to business entities. Quantitative and qualitative changes to the demand side of the market made in the past 26 years have resulted in tougher competition among higher education institutions whose behaviors, instead of being driven by sector convergence, have turned competitive. The initial explosive growth in the number of degree seekers has gradually abated, mainly due to two concurrent processes: the declining number of potential higher education students in the senior population, most of which have already upgraded their education in the post-transition period, coupled with the demographic low that will continue to threaten the prosperity of increasingly more higher education institutions in the years to come.

Having faced a variety of constraints on their growth, including toughening competition, higher education institutions started engaging broadly in marketing activities, taking special interest in branding and image management. What this entails is the need to identify factors to be made into the anchors of university identity and to convey values desired by the university as well as by its stakeholders. Among university stakeholders, a foremost group is students, who are to be seen by higher education institutions as clients making purchase decisions relating to an educational product. Admittedly, students are a distinctive type of client who relies heavily on the authority of professionals (academics) in making their

choice of university and assessing an educational product, hence student opinions are depicted in the context of views articulated by faculty.

The paper discusses the findings of a survey showing that the two respondent groups rank relevant factors differently. What university staff rate the highest are factors associated with an institution's educational services, i.e. its course offerings, and terms of service. They also value collaboration with other organizations, including industry-academia ties. Among factors that they find less important there are university history, tradition, and experience. Students, on the other hand, give precedence to attractive educational products, university brand and reputation, and the labor market's perception of the degrees awarded by a specific institution.

Today the branding process, involving management of university image and reputation, increasingly often forms an integral part of marketing strategies pursued by higher education institutions. Institutions of higher learning strive to create a brand that is widely recognized in the market, not only by students but by other stakeholder groups as well, primarily by employers. Importantly enough, universities need to be responsive to constantly changing external conditions, hence the survey reported in the paper provides just a starting point for further exploration of this research area.

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## Czynniki kształtujące wizerunek szkół wyższych w oczach klienta

**Streszczenie.** Artykuł dotyczy problemów brandingów, a szczególnie czynników determinujących wizerunek uczelni w opinii studentów-klientów. Zaprezentowano w nim rankingi czynników kształtujących obraz uczelni, przygotowane na podstawie materiału empirycznego zebranego w trakcie badań nad przystosowaniem polskich uczelni do funkcjonowania w gospodarce rynkowej, zrealizowanych w 2014 r. Zgromadzone dane mogą stanowić źródło informacji dla uczelni, które podejmują działania zmierzające do budowania marki i pozytywnego image'u w oczach swoich interesariuszy.

**Słowa kluczowe:** student-klient, wizerunek, marka, czynniki kształtujące image uczelni