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## Conditions, Contemporary Importance and Prospects of Higher Education Marketing on the Example of Polish Universities

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### Abstract

The aim of the article is to present selected aspects of contemporary marketing of Polish universities. Particular attention was paid to determinants of functioning of universities as a part of the European Higher Education Area, their marketing activities, the modern sense of marketing of these market actors, and the perspectives of its development. The purpose of the article was realized based on the analysis of secondary sources and primary research of authors. Research carried out for the purpose of this article are qualitative in nature and was carried out by *In-Depth Interviews* among about 14 representatives of Polish universities.

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### 1. Introduction

The dynamic changes in the environment of contemporary universities mean that they are concentrated on the expectations and needs of their stakeholders, and especially candidates and students. Due to this focus the university management process has the marketing character. Marketing orientation of the university, as in the case of enterprises, is continually evolving. The main determinants of the direction of this evolution is the development of

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information technologies, the growth of the Internet penetration rate and its priority role as an important source of message in the segment of young consumers.

The purpose of this article is to present the specificity and marketing perspectives of Polish universities against the key changes in their environment. In the article Polish and foreign secondary sources were used, including publications of Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education, the Central Statistical Office, acts and development programs, Polish and foreign book publications, press releases and websites associated with the development of modern marketing trends in higher education. There were also presented the results of qualitative primary research of the author carried out with an application of In Depth Interview method among representatives of 14 Polish universities (both public and private in 7 provincial cities), regarding the specificity and marketing perspectives of the university. The article can be a useful source of information for all those interested in marketing management aspects of modern universities on the directions of changes in marketing at universities, the importance of modern marketing concepts for students, candidates and university marketing practices of Polish universities and perspectives in this regard.

## 2. Conditions of Polish universities functioning

Turbulent macro and microenvironment of Polish higher education determine intensive changes and constant challenges in this sector. Segments of university macro-environment which affect their situation consist in legal, demographic, international, technological, economic and socio-cultural environments. The article draws attention to the role of the selected segments of the environment. This part focuses on the image of Polish higher education, its legal and demographic environment, which has been shaping clearly in recent decades. The next parts of the article one emphasized the key influence of the technological environment on the ongoing very dynamic changes in the evolution of higher education marketing.

The legal environment of Polish universities is shaped by the normalization in the Constitution of the Republic of Poland and the bill of Polish Minister of Science and Higher Education. Especially important for Polish higher education sector was the Act of 12 September 1990 on higher education, which allowed the formation of private universities. It influenced (among other factors such as an increase in educational aspirations of young people and a baby boom which lasted until 2002.) on the so-called educational boom which reflected in the increased number of students and the universities. The number of students in Poland increased from 404 thousand in 1990/1991 to 1 941 thousand in the peak year 2006/2007 (Higher Education Institutions and their Finances in 2012, 2013), (an increase by 370%). Since then the number has been constantly decreasing.

In the academic year 2013/2014 at 438 universities of all types (public 132 - 74.3% of all students and 306 private) 1 550 thousand students were educated (Higher Education Institutions and their Finances in 2013, 2014). The gross enrollment rate, which is a measure of the popularity of education, was rising gradually from 12.9% in the academic year 1990/1991 to 53.8% in the academic year 2010/2011, then fell to 49.2% in the academic year 2013/2014 (net enrollment rates increased respectively from 9.8% in 1990/1991 to 40.8% in 2010/2011, and then decreased to 38.6% in 2013/2014) (Higher Education Institutions and their Finances in 2013, 2014). By subsequent laws there were established state vocational universities whose task was to prepare students to perform certain professions (1997). Polish educational system started being adapted to European standards (2005) and then it was harmonized with the solutions implemented in the European Higher Education Area (2011)<sup>†</sup>. Polish universities were to become an attractive place to acquire knowledge for foreign students and research scholars from abroad<sup>‡</sup> (Higher Education Institutions and their Finances in 2013, 2014; Higher Education Institutions and their Finances in 2012, 2013). The last Act of 2014 focused in turn, among others, on increasing opportunities for adults to supplement education, diversification of the offer of studies and support in entering the labor market.

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<sup>†</sup> The Act of 18 March 2011 Amending the Act of Law on Higher Education, the Law on Academic Degrees and Titles and on Degrees and Title in the Art and amending certain other laws; Journal of Law No. 84 item. 455.

<sup>‡</sup> In the academic year 2013/2014 the number of foreign students studying at Polish universities amounted to 36 thousand persons to 21,5 thousand in 2010/2011 and 6,6 thousand in the year 2000/2001, which reflects a major improvement in the area of internationalization of Polish universities.

Changes in demographic trends, including a rapid population decline at the “student” has a particularly strong impact on the current situation and future of the universities in Poland and in the world. The number of young people aged 20-24 in Poland will decrease in the next 10 years (2025.) by almost 700 thousand (after a slight increase after 2030 there will be a further decline). The dominant part of the non-public sector of universities, which now educates almost 400 thousand students and most of the paid studies in private schools will have to be closed. The situation of Polish universities designated by the changes in already mentioned and other segments of their macro-environment makes them seek effective ways to compete, which include new, proven business concepts of marketing.

### **3. Marketing evolution of Polish universities**

Marketing of higher education as a separate discipline emerged in the United States in the mid-80s of the last century as a result of unfavorable demographic trends. According to Kotler and Fox (1995), universities in the US and in Western Europe went through a series of steps of their adaptation of treating marketing as a promotion, by segmenting the market, implementation of marketing research, positioning the university, the strategic dimension of marketing, and relationship marketing (referring to the relationship with the students). The idea of relationship marketing seems to be still, according to the analysis of Western literature related to the subject, the guiding idea in the management of modern universities. However, the tools used within this idea are changing as well as the means and methods of achieving the objectives and the personal scope of the relationship (they concern all - internal and external stakeholders and not just university students).

Marketing at Polish universities has become a controversial subject of interest among theorists and academics at the turn of the twentieth/twenty-first century as a result of the impending demographic decline, falling demand for higher education and increasing competition between universities. The academic community was, however, an important barrier in the initial phase of the adaptation process of marketing orientation at universities. According to Krzyzanowska (1994), some university authorities did not accept marketing in relation to higher education, but they were even declared opponents of this concept. The reasons for such a situation was a failure to understand the real essence of marketing, identifying it with promotion and associating only with business. Universities were treated as entities from "outside market" which should not be affected by the market tools and mechanisms (more favorable and receptive to marketing and market were representatives of private universities).

The manifestations of gradual implementation of marketing orientation at Polish universities included :

- Promotional activities carried out initially mainly during the admissions,
- Movement up in the organizational hierarchy of the department involved in the university marketing,
- Increased interest in the opinions of students about classes and lectures, academic teachers and their satisfaction with studies, implying the realization of formal studies in this field,
- Customization of the “product” (majors) to the expectations of both students and the labor market (Polish universities now offer more than 4,500 courses of study, including "fashionable" majors, e.g. Internal Security, those in line with current or forecasted expectations of the labor market - IT, communications, mechatronics, or the original ones distinguishing the university from others, such as oligophreno-pedagogy with art therapy),
- Interest in the needs and expectations of all university stakeholders (including students, prospective students, alumni, business representatives) and the desire to maintain (thanks to their satisfaction) sustainable and beneficial for all parties relationships.

The last of these activities are reflected in currently observed trend towards the development of relationship marketing to its "mature" forms – marketing of stakeholders.

### **4. Prospects for higher education marketing**

One of the most important trends in contemporary marketing of universities and their branding, is the fact that they have become the subject of much more attention and interest of the university authorities than it was in the past (Trends in Higher Education Marketing, Recruitment, and Technology, 2014). The choices made by students, the need to meet their requirements and expectations have become one of the most important issues for the university authorities and one of their main objectives (Esteban, et al. 2002; Jurkowitsch, 2006).

Conditioning of Polish universities are forcing them to intensive competition, and this applies both private and public universities. Universities must, therefore, take effective marketing activities, i.e. measures successfully implemented in business in the analyzed segment of young consumers.

A concept that seems to be the future of the university marketing is inbound marketing, which is such an approach to marketing strategy, which according to the creator of the concept - Brian Halligan (2010) is the art of being found in the network, through sites such as Facebook, YouTube or Twitter. According to Siejak (2012) it is based on providing potential customers with useful and desired by them information to attract them to the website, where the brand generates interaction and builds relationships with potential and existing customers. As part of inbound marketing in addition to social media there are also used blogs, content marketing, and SEO (search engine optimization).

The arguments in favor of the dominance of this concept as the university direction of marketing development are its low costs and effectiveness to reach the target market, especially the generation of called by Prensky (2001) - Digital Natives (hyper media generation of people born after 1985 who do not know the world without multimedia devices and cannot live without them) who are the potential candidates and students. The effectiveness of the above concept is proved by a lot of research, among others HubSpot research and Gartner Research, according to which 92% of companies using inbound marketing noticed 1,3-1,5 increase in traffic on their websites after 6 months from the start of inbound operations, the number of generated leads has increased up to eight times, conversion rate (showing what number of the Internet users visiting a website made the desired action, for example filled the form, made a purchase) - ten times.

Social media are of particular importance among university inbound marketing tools. Both in Western countries and in Poland they are now a key component of the university communication with stakeholders. According to Chwilkowska (2013) being on Facebook and intensive communication (mostly with students) is now a standard at Polish universities, and positive effects of communication on this and other sites are reflected by the fact that the average rate of user involvement ("the number of people who talk about it") is many times higher than the same indicator for companies profiles.

Activities in the area of inbound marketing are aimed at establishing and building relationships with students and other stakeholder groups. However, their persistence requires from the university to take many professional marketing activities. In this respect individual, interactive, reliable and fast communication with students (mainly by e-mail) seems to be the priority, and it is possible by the collection of data about them in databases, which is the essence of relationship marketing. According to the American studies (*Communicating with Students...* 2011) such communication does not always take place. Only 26% of universities respond to any questions directed to them, 73% of the requests received a response and the average response time to questions is 108 minutes. This last aspect is extremely important as the university which the first answers to the question of a student has 238% higher conversion rate than the next one.

The growing popularity of "inbound" tools does not mean that other classical instruments will expire. However, due to specific young people's critical attitude to advertising and brazen indifference and ignoring many of its forms is essential in their selection of exceptional care and knowledge on the opinions and expectations of candidates and students in this area. This also applies to the content of media, used illustration, location (e.g. outdoor advertising), time and form of meetings between representatives of university with applicants and students.

## **5. Method of research**

Research carried out by the author were of a qualitative nature and were conducted with an application of In depth Interview method because of the need for full and cogent opinions of the respondents. The research was carried out among 14 representatives of Polish universities, i.e. among Deputy Chancellors (for marketing and development of the university) or departments managers responsible for marketing of the university. For the study there were selected two (public and private) colleges of 7 Polish cities that are capitals of provinces or districts, i.e. Poznan, Wroclaw, Warsaw, Rzeszow, Katowice, Krakow and Gdynia. The university representatives did not agree to provide names of their institutions primarily due to concerns about the possibility of using the information by the universities belonging to the "direct competition", i.e. the universities with the same activity profile, for example economic one (type of university is treated as less important in terms of competitiveness). The questions included in

the research problem consisted of the following thematic groups: currently used by universities instruments and marketing operations, trends and reasons for changes in their range, marketing perspectives of higher education, the approach of university authorities to marketing.

As measuring instruments, the study used an interview scenario with an average degree of standardization and a voice recorder. Interviews were carried out at the premises of the universities, in the period from April to November 2015. They lasted between 1-2,5 hours, depending on the degree of involvement of the university in marketing activities.

## 6. Findings

As the completed studies show, intensification of university marketing activities is now an undeniable fact, and it was the opinion of all respondents. They claim that these activities are characterized by diversification and the increasing professionalism. According to one of the representatives of public universities, "of course, that there is an intensification of marketing activities of the university; we follow the operations of commercial companies in this regard, their expertise and tools ". According to another: "You will notice a clear intensification of marketing activities. These include organizational changes – the team for university marketing was created, the scope of my responsibilities is still increasing, we use modern forms of advertising, we slowly resign from traditional forms, e.g. in the press, as it does not hit a thing of the youth ". The above activities in the case of private universities surveyed seem to be a bit wider. For example, " there are plenty of areas of intensification of marketing activities at our university, ranging from PR activities through various online activities, including website positioning, sponsored links, contextual advertising, forums and social media (FB, Golden Line, Google Plus, Twitter, You Tube), diversified marketing studies, including eye-tracking, virtual labs, teaching film production, collaboration with enterprises (affiliate clubs), and even a lot of other activities ".

Marketing tools, which undergo the most intensive changes, include promotion tools, and the product of universities - faculties and departments. The dynamic changes in the area of the latter take place in non-public schools that are more flexible to responses to market changes, but the most intense changes concern majors, because they do not require the fulfillment of conditions regarding minimum staff requirements. Changes in the majors and specializations are determined by very different factors depending on the institution, including test results on students satisfaction, the labor market, recognized interests of candidates, human resources, opinions of employers.

When asked the first question, respondents often said about the changes in the area of promotion, arguing the opinion of the increase in intensification of marketing activities of universities. It should be noted, however, that in addition to the currently dominant promotional activities on the Internet (with particular emphasis on social media), but also popular especially in the surveyed private schools Video Marketing "because young people now do not read, just watch" and mobile applications, the respondents emphasized the huge importance of universities events including public lectures, open days and meetings with students in the framework of visits to secondary schools. According to one of the representatives of public universities "personal contact with the candidates of our staff and students is not irreplaceable, no form of communication with them is not so effective".

The attitude of the university authorities towards marketing of private universities is invariably positive. The question about this issue seemed even "weird" to some representatives of these universities. "The attitude of the authorities in relation to marketing the university? It was always positive, of course, this must be a market approach, non-public university operates as a company "; "For the university authorities that actions are obvious, they seek out ideas, they send the ideas to the marketing department to analyze, there is no specific budget for these actions, if something seems beneficial there will be always money".

In the case of public universities respondents showed no surprise about the question, but all pointed to positive changes in attitudes of the authorities. For example, "Marketing is much more appreciated by the university authorities, especially in the last 3-4 years. I hope that they will allocate more resources to marketing. " Limited financial resources for marketing and fear for their shortage in the future appeared on several occasions during the study in the text of statements made by representatives of public universities.

## 7. Conclusion

Conditioning of Polish universities functioning, including a particularly important role of demographic environment, legal and technological influence on a clear increase in the importance of marketing in their management as well as on the higher intensity and diversification of marketing activities. They have a wide acceptance of the university authorities (including public ones, financed mainly from the state budget) of marketing orientation as necessary in a competitive higher education sector, a wide range of education offer adjusted, among others, to labor market needs and expectations of candidates and in the use of effective, i.e. checked in business concepts of modern marketing communications, which include inbound marketing, with the key role of social networking sites. The use of inbound marketing, including presence and activity of the university in social media is now undoubtedly necessary and it is continually gaining in popularity. However, it should be emphasized that it is not the only effective way of interaction and communication of universities with stakeholders, it is also not an important for candidates way of communication in decision-making process related to the choice of university (neither in Western Europe nor in Poland), despite visiting social sites many times during the day. The most effective in this regard are the formal sources – universities websites, personal contacts between the representatives of universities while recruitment actions at schools, open days and other events. But the most important according e.g. Hall and Peszko (2015) are the opinions of students and graduates. This applies to both Polish and Western universities. Effective communication of universities with stakeholders, with particular emphasis on candidates and students requires now, depending on the purpose of communication, much broader (than mandatory - as part of inbound marketing) range of tools and activities, with a particular focus on invariably significant personal contacts of representatives of universities from stakeholders.

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