

STUDY OF LEARNERS' EDUCATIONAL PREFERENCES AS A FACTOR IN SHAPING THE UNIVERSITY'S IMAGE

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Purpose: The aim of the article is to present the results of a study on the opinions of high school students in Czestochowa regarding the factors that shape their decisions related to university choice and to explore the possibilities of using these findings in shaping the image of the university, using Czestochowa University of Technology as a case study.

Design/methodology/approach: For the purposes of the article, a literature review on the subject was conducted, and empirical research was carried out using a diagnostic survey method. The analysis of the data obtained during the survey was performed using the Yule's phi coefficient.

Findings: The study allowed for diagnosing the expectations and educational preferences of high school students regarding higher education and the factors influencing their choice of a study location. When making decisions, the most crucial factor is the availability of a desirable field of study, followed by the university's image and the attractiveness of the city where the university is located.

Research limitations/implications: The study had a limited scope as it was a one-time survey. It is advisable to continue and expand the sample size for future studies to allow for comparative analyses.

Practical implications: The article presents excerpts from a study conducted for the purposes of the development strategy of Czestochowa University of Technology. The results of this study have provided insights into the actions that should be taken to build the university's image and strengthen its brand within the local community.

Social implications: The utilization of the research results will enable the university to better align its activities with the needs of its stakeholders, particularly the students. This will have a positive impact on the university's image and demonstrate its commitment to social responsibility.

Originality/value: This study is one of the few that presents research results conducted among high school students rather than among university applicants or current students.

Keywords: educational preferences, image management, students' expectations, university, university brand.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

Polish universities are increasingly taking action aimed at strengthening their image and attractiveness to attract an optimal number of students. They employ diverse strategies and methods focused on initiatives such as cooperation with local and regional schools, creating educational services offers, including "universities for children and youth" (Mioduchowska-Jaroszewicz et al., 2018). Other forms of promoting the university's brand and shaping its image like open days, campaigns highlighting the academic achievements of staff and students, science festivals, e.t.c. The image effects of these activities are assessed through opinion surveys conducted among candidates or students (Mont, Bélanger, 2004; Ryńca, Radomska, 2018; Ramdan et al., 2021; Pacholarz, 2022; and others).

Reports on research examining the impact of such initiatives on how learners perceive higher education institutions as places for future academic education are rare. At the same time, researchers recognize the necessity of conducting such studies (Royo, 2017). The limited number of such studies makes it challenging to assess whether the initiatives undertaken by universities serve to attract participating learners or are merely a supplementary form of school activities that do not influence decisions regarding the choice of future study place and field. A similar approach was observed at Częstochowa University of Technology (PCz). The university undertook such actions without assessing their actual promotional impact.

It was only during the preparation of the development strategy for Częstochowa University of Technology (PCz) that the institution was prompted to conduct research to determine whether the campaigns conducted among pupils were perceived by them as factors enhancing its attractiveness as a potential place for further education. These studies also allowed for the identification of factors that students consider when making decisions regarding their choice of a higher education institution. Based on this, it is possible to determine which of the expectations of high school students PCz meets and which ones need to be adjusted.

The article will present the results of these studies, and their potential utility in managing the university's image in the long term will be indicated. The authors of the article will complement the presentation of these results with an analysis of the literature containing research findings and recommendations from other national and international authors.

2. Literature Review

The necessity for higher education institutions to engage in marketing activities began to be recognized in highly developed countries in the 1970s (Mount, Bélanger, 2004). In the following decade, incorporating promotional activities and building the university's

image into the management process became a reality. Initially, actions aimed at building a positive image were taken by private universities, which were competing for students as customers (Chen, 2016; Ramdan et al., 2021; and others). Later on, the need for promotional and branding efforts also became evident to administrators of public universities (Azoury et al., 2014; Lafuente-Ruiz-de-Sabando et al., 2018).

The image of a higher education institution reflects what people think about it. It is also a kind of perception that forms in the minds of individuals who come into direct or indirect contact with it (Sławiński, 2011) and is disseminated in the form of public opinion (Wilkins, Huisman, 2015). In the case of a higher education institution, it determines its uniqueness resulting from the utilization of material and non-material resources to distinguish it from other higher education entities (Palacios-Marqués et al., 2019). Therefore, in contemporary societies, the image and brand of a university become increasingly important attributes for every higher education institution (Golata, Sojkin, 2020).

Managing the image of Polish universities, like other non-profit institutions, was considered unnecessary for decades (Oleksy, 2022). It was only the need to compete through the quality of education as a factor in building a strong brand for the purpose of attracting and retaining key customers, who are students (Pacholarz, 2022), and the approach to students as the primary stakeholders without whom universities would cease to exist, that changed the perspective of those in charge of these institutions regarding such efforts (Witczak, Mitręga, 2015).

D'Uggento et al (2022) indicated that pride associated with the brand of the university is a crucial factor for students while making a decision to choose a university, therefore the image of the university is an important decisive factor. Students with a high reputation of their university develop higher brand experience, which then strengthens the pride to belong to the institution and identify with it pride seemed to be a most evident factor in the multidimensional aspect of emotional engagement of students. The study revealed a positive association between the high brand experience of the university and the pride of the students.

This change in the approach to management is the result of higher education authorities recognizing that the popularity of a university and its ability to attract students increasingly depend on actively building relationships with stakeholders, including children, youth, and their parents (Nowacka, 2016; Lafuente-Ruiz-de-Sabando et al., 2018; Adamska, 2018).

Factors such as credibility, the quality of educational services offered, and the past and current perception by communities interacting with the university also play a significant role (Ramdan et al., 2021). Chen (2016) found that at public universities in Iran, students' identification was positively related to the university brand. Students who identify with the university's brand through word of mouth and buzz marketing convey positive information about its image. For these reasons, universities, in order to survive and thrive in the market, should continuously shape their image professionally, undertaking long-term, deliberate, planned, and systematic efforts to disseminate positive information about themselves (Pawlak-Wolanin, Gudowski, 2016).

Particularly important are actions related to showcasing the intellectual potential of the university and its achievements, which contribute to building its prestige and visibility in the social environment (Duarte et al., 2010; Załona, 2019; Kowalska-Musiał, 2023). Building the university's image and positive relationships with the community are also facilitated by the university's openness to current and anticipated changes in its environment (Golata, Sojkin, 2020). Managing its image also requires that the actions related to it are known to and accepted by the staff. This allows employees to identify with the university, participate in shaping its image, and manifest through their own attitudes the values that are crucial for the university (Wæraas, Solbakk, 2009).

As can be seen, incorporating image-related activities into management practices arising from the implementation of a strategy requires university authorities to base their actions on a classical approach that includes four groups of activities: planning, organizing, leading, and controlling. Key to this is proper planning, which necessitates the examination and analysis of the expectations and perception of the higher education institution by its stakeholders (Załona, 2019), including students who are part of the local community.

In the literature, it is emphasized that the smaller the university, the greater the importance of its image and its relationships with the local community for its current and future functioning. A significant portion of its future students is likely to come from this local community, making it essential to continually monitor this image (Ryńca, Radomska, 2018). An effective way to diagnose this is through conducting systematic marketing research among external stakeholders, which can include online surveys. In 2022, PCz initiated such research, and the results pertaining to the needs and expectations of high school students deciding on their choice of university are presented in the later part of the article.

3. Materials and methods

The results presented later in the article are based on a quantitative study conducted as part of the preparation of the Development Strategy for Częstochowa University of Technology until 2030. The research method employed was a diagnostic survey, utilizing an online questionnaire as the data collection tool. The study was conducted in June 2022 among 1,039 pupils from Częstochowa's upper-secondary schools in their final year. Some of the surveyed pupils were residents of the city, while the other portion consisted of individuals who were studying in Częstochowa but lived outside the city. Among the 1,039 pupils who opened the questionnaire, 250 did not respond to any of the questions, meaning that the sample size for the study comprised 789 respondents.

The research aimed to identify whether there were differences in the needs and expectations regarding future universities between students residing in Częstochowa and those living outside the city. If such differences existed, the study sought to determine the specific areas where these distinctions occurred. As a result, it would be possible to pinpoint the areas of action that PCz should undertake to enhance its attractiveness as a potential university choice for the surveyed students. The following research hypotheses were formulated for the study:

- H1. High school learners do not have specific plans regarding the locality in which they want to study.
- H2. Respondents based their choice of the city where they planned to study on the image of the university and the reputation of the city in which it is located.
- H3. Learners, regardless of their place of residence, select the academic field they are interested in first and then choose the university offering that field.
- H4. Statistically significant differences in educational preferences exist between individuals residing in Częstochowa and those living outside the city.

The indicators for planning future studies were the declarations of the choice of the study location and the factors influencing the choice of a higher education institution respondents intended to apply to. The indicators for knowledge about the factors shaping the attractiveness of a university were the responses to questions about expectations regarding the educational offerings and social facilities provided by the university. The indicators for differences in the educational preferences and expectations of high school students were the pieces of information about their place of residence.

In the statistical analysis of the research results, the focus was on identifying correlations between the respondents' place of residence (Częstochowa vs. another locality) and their responses to specific questions, as well as the type of school they attended (general high school vs. other secondary school) and their responses. The statistical analysis was conducted following the procedure adopted for calculating the ϕ -Youla correlation coefficient, which was determined using PQStat Software 1.8.6. This allowed for the assessment of the strength of the identified correlations.

4. Results

Among the surveyed high school learner, there were 465 females, 268 males, and 56 individuals who did not specify their gender. In the entire sample, the distribution of responses regarding the place of residence of the respondents was similar - 346 individuals indicated Częstochowa, 344 stated that they live outside Częstochowa, and 184 did not provide an answer to this question. Since information about the place of residence was essential for the analysis of the research results, the surveys of those who did not respond to this question were

not considered in the subsequent analysis. Therefore, the research sample was limited to 690 individuals.

Among the final-year high school pupils, only 48 individuals (7%) indicated that they want to study in Częstochowa, 188 (28%) plan to pursue studies elsewhere, 343 respondents (50%) were indifferent about where they would study, and 111 (16%) do not plan to pursue higher education (Table 1). The table presents the distribution of responses regarding of learners' preferences regarding the location where they would like to pursue their higher education.

Among the learners who decided to study in Częstochowa, 18 individuals (2.6% of the sample) chose Częstochowa University of Technology and 25 individuals (3.7% of the sample) selected Jan Długosz University. The remaining 5 individuals (0.7% of the sample) did not specify a particular university. This suggests that, in general, the respondents did not have specific plans regarding the university they wanted to attend, what leads to a positive verification of this hypothesis. To unambiguously verify the first hypothesis, the value and significance of the relationship between the place of residence and the reasons for choosing a university were further examined by calculating the ϕ -Youla correlation coefficient (Table 2).

For all statistically significant importance is attached to the universities offering an interesting study program ($\phi = 0.246$ for residents of Częstochowa and 0.362 for those residing outside the city), the university's reputation/prestige ($\phi = 0.116$ for residents of Częstochowa and 0.236 for those residing outside the city), and the attractiveness of the city where the university is located ($\phi = 0.209$ for residents of Częstochowa and 0.193 for those residing outside the city). Additionally, for residents from outside Częstochowa, the costs associated with studying are statistically significant ($\phi = 0.123$ for those residing outside the city). According to the obtained data, there were no significant correlations found between the place of residence and the approach to choosing the university where the respondents planned to study. Therefore, the first hypothesis has been positively verified. These responses were more frequently indicated by students from general high schools.

To verify the second hypothesis, data obtained from responses to questions about expectations regarding the university's educational offerings and social facilities were utilized. These responses were correlated with demographic data regarding the place of residence and the type of high school attended by the respondents. In Table 3, the distribution of responses from study participants regarding their expectations concerning the educational offerings of the university is presented, taking into account their place of residence and the type of high school they attended. The values of the ϕ -Youla correlation coefficient and χ^2 allowed us to determine the existence of significant relationships between the place of residence and the type of high school where the respondents studied, and their expectations regarding the educational offerings of the university. All participants attached significant importance to the professionalism of the teaching staff ($\phi = 0.172$ for residents of Częstochowa and 0.209 for those residing outside the city), practical preparation for future professional work ($\phi = 0.134$ for residents of Częstochowa and 0.195 for those residing outside the city), and the possibility

of finding satisfying employment after completing their studies ($\varphi = 0.235$ for residents of Częstochowa and 0.277 for those residing outside the city).

The results presented in Tables 2 and 3 positively confirm the second hypothesis. Respondents, when deciding to pursue their studies, take into account the prestige of the university and the attractiveness of the city where it is located. Similarly, the third hypothesis has been verified. The most important factor in deciding where to pursue their studies is the availability of the desired field of study for the respondents.

For residents of Częstochowa, statistically significant importance was also attached to: high-quality foreign language education ($\varphi = 0.126$) and the corresponding opportunity for studying abroad ($\varphi = 0.201$), as well as the possibility of collaboration with companies cooperating with the university ($\varphi = 0.120$) and the opportunity to connect with professionals ($\varphi = 0.145$). Learners living outside Częstochowa statistically more often emphasized the importance of a close relationship with the teaching staff ($\varphi = 0.175$), an interesting study program ($\varphi = 0.238$), the opportunity to pursue their own academic interests ($\varphi = 0.168$), and student internships allowing them to acquire professional skills ($\varphi = 0.199$). When comparing the responses of students from general high schools and other types of schools, it was found that the former more frequently provided statistically significant answers.

The last issue subjected to statistical verification concerned the expectations of the respondents regarding the social facilities that the university should offer to attract them as potential candidates (Table 4). It turns out that there were few indications for which a statistically significant relationship was found. For residents of Częstochowa, it was only the availability of dormitory spaces ($\varphi = 0.115$), and for those residing outside Częstochowa, it was the availability of functioning on-campus bars and cafeterias ($\varphi = 0.115$). Therefore, it can be inferred that students from Częstochowa were planning to move to another city, while those living outside Częstochowa were less likely to consider this option.

In summary, we can also verify the fourth hypothesis, which assumed that there were statistically significant differences in educational preferences between individuals residing in Częstochowa and those living outside the city. The hypothesis was partially confirmed. Residents of Częstochowa paid more attention to whether the university would enable them to acquire language skills for studying abroad. On the other hand, individuals from outside Częstochowa placed greater importance on the opportunity to develop their own scientific interests and collaborate with the teaching staff. In other areas, the differences were not statistically significant.

5. Discussion and summary

The study presented in the article shows that despite the wide range of educational offerings at the Częstochowa University of Technology for high school students, their interest in it as a potential place to pursue their studies is proportionally low. It is also impossible to determine how the respondents perceive its image, but it is clear that the university's image and the city in which it is located are significant factors in making decisions about the place of education. This means that the results of the study presented by the authors confirm those of other studies presented in scientific reports (Chen, 2017; Ramdan et al., 2021; Pacholarz 2022; and others).

While conducting a literature review, the authors noticed that both domestic and foreign studies most commonly involve groups such as students, business representatives, parents (Ramdan et al., 2021; Azoury et al., 2014; Golata, Sojkin, 2020; and others). This approach by researchers may suggest that high school students are not the optimal target group for such research. However, considering the number of students residing in Częstochowa and its surroundings pursuing studies in all faculties and fields at the university, it seems that the local community positively evaluates the quality of its educational offerings and services. Therefore, it can be assumed that its image is also positive. The results of research presented by other authors support the validity of such reasoning. In these studies, the quality of education and the attractiveness of the educational offerings are indicated as key factors positively influencing the university's image (Zaclona, 2021; Adamska, 2018; Kowalska-Musiał, 2023; and others).

In summary, the management of a university's image has been an interesting topic for both Polish and international researchers for many years. In their studies, they often focus on external stakeholders, examining local communities, business representatives, alumni, and other social groups involved in direct and indirect relationships with universities (Lafuente-Ruiz-de-Sabando et al., 2018). However, there has been a lack of research on potential students, i.e., high school students. The results presented in the article, obtained from this group of individuals, indicate that valuable knowledge about students' educational preferences and their academic plans can be built based on their responses. Conducting such research allows universities to gather information that enhances the accuracy of designing new educational programs or estimating the level of interest in studying at the institution. Knowledge in this area facilitates rational planning of actions to increase the university's appeal among the local population of high school students.

On the other hand, conducting and utilizing survey research as a source of information about the image of a university located in the same city where the students go to school and express their opinions about it may seem to have limited significance. A significant portion of these students may be interested in studying locally, while others may prefer universities in different cities, making the image or prestige of the local university less relevant to them. However, such research can serve as source material for developing a long-term strategy to increase

interest in the university's offerings by enhancing its attractiveness and providing young people with information about its programs that have been tailored to the diagnosed needs and expectations of the students.

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Appendix

Table 1.

Place Where Students Would Like to Pursue Higher Education

Częstochowa	Another Location	Indifferent About Location	Not Planning to Pursue Higher Education
48 (7%)	188 (28%)	343 (50%)	111 (16%)

Source: own work.

Table 2.

The values of the correlation coefficients ϕ -Youla, χ^2 , and their significance for the place of residence and reasons for choosing a university

Element of university characteristics	Measure					
	ϕ	χ^2	p	ϕ	χ^2	p
	Residing in Częstochowa			Residing outside of Częstochowa		
Offers a program of study that interests me	0,246	17,783	0,000	0,362	38,965	0,000
Has a favorable location for me	0,013	0,052	0,820	0,066	1,290	0,256
Costs associated with studying	0,078	1,773	0,183	0,123	4,495	0,034
University reputation/prestige	0,116	3,935	0,047	0,236	16,626	0,000
Family traditions	- 0,089	2,330	0,127	0,091	2,444	0,118
Family suggestion	0,112	3,689	0,055	0,033	0,319	0,572
Suggestion from friends/colleagues	- 0,102	3,029	0,082	- 0,011	0,037	0,848
Attractiveness of the city where the university is located	0,209	12,811	0,000	0,193	11,157	0,001

statistically significant values are bolded

Source: own work.

Table 3.

The values of the ϕ -Youla correlation coefficient, χ^2 , and their significance for the place of residence and expectations regarding the educational offerings of the university

Assessed element of the educational offer	Measure					
	ϕ	χ^2	p	ϕ	χ^2	p
	Residing in Częstochowa			Residing outside of Częstochowa		
Professionalism of the teaching staff	0,172	8,742	0,003	0,209	13,009	0,000
High-quality foreign language education	0,126	4,679	0,031	0,113	3,779	0,052
Collaborative relationships with the teaching staff	0,092	2,495	0,114	0,175	9,117	0,003
Interaction with instructors through virtual media (social media)	- 0,023	0,154	0,695	0,078	1,819	0,177
An engaging curriculum	0,102	3,039	0,081	0,238	16,924	0,000
Modern equipment in classrooms/laboratories	- 0,019	0,101	0,751	0,104	3,224	0,073
Access to the latest technologies	- 0,011	0,035	0,853	0,020	0,117	0,733
Opportunities for pursuing personal research interests	0,022	0,146	0,702	0,168	8,404	0,004
Collaboration with the academic faculty in research	- 0,055	0,886	0,347	0,097	2,813	0,094
Participation in academic circles/academic organizations	0,083	2,025	0,155	0,036	0,396	0,529
Opportunities for studying abroad	0,201	11,914	0,001	0,006	0,010	0,918
Student internships that provide professional competencies	0,064	1,191	0,275	0,199	11,756	0,001
Practical preparation for future professional work	0,134	5,297	0,021	0,195	11,363	0,001
Opportunities to collaborate with companies cooperating with the university	0,120	4,233	0,040	0,084	2,108	0,146
Direct contact with industry professional	0,145	6,193	0,013	0,102	3,081	0,079
The possibility of finding satisfying employment after graduation or during the course of studies	0,235	16,205	0,000	0,277	22,911	0,000

statistically significant values are bolded.

Source: own work.

Table 4.

The values of the ϕ -Youla correlation coefficient, χ^2 , and their significance for the type of completed school and expectations regarding the social support infrastructure of university students residing in Częstochowa and outside it

Assessed element of social support	Measure					
	ϕ	χ^2	p	ϕ	χ^2	p
	Residing in Częstochowa			Residing outside of Częstochowa		
Availability of dormitory spaces	0,115	3,875	0,049	- 0,099	2,910	0,088
Operating cafeterias / bars	- 0,042	0,513	0,474	- 0,115	3,918	0,048
Recreational areas on the university campus	- 0,042	0,510	0,475	- 0,008	0,017	0,895
Availability of sports facilities	0,111	3,612	0,057	0,080	1,922	0,166
Parking spaces and convenient access	- 0,080	1,887	0,170	- 0,034	0,334	0,563
Easy access to all university facilities/clustering of buildings in the campus	- 0,072	1,514	0,219	0,033	0,319	0,572
Facility adaptation for people with disabilities	0,076	1,717	0,190	0,010	0,032	0,858
Availability of psychological support services	- 0,038	0,421	0,516	- 0,100	2,966	0,085

statistically significant values are bolded.

Source: own work.