

FACTORS DETERMINING THE CHOICE OF UNIVERSITY BY CANDIDATES

Anna Szelaġ-Sikora

University of Agriculture H. Kołataja in Kraków, Poland

Aneta Oleksy-Gębczyk

Academy of Applied Sciences in Nowy Sącz, Poland

Katarzyna Kowalska-Jarnot

School of Economics and Informatics in Cracow, Poland

Abstract. *The presence of non-public schools on the Polish higher education market has led to increased competition and constituted a fundamental incentive to introduce marketing management in universities, both public and private. The educational services market is dominated by price competition, supported by promotional activities. Image and price are the two most important reasons for taking up studies at a given university, and the image is a particularly important source of building a university's competitive advantage. However, between public and private universities in Poland, there are significant differences in terms of image structure. The aim of this article is to examine what identity factors are decisive for candidates, what sources of information about the university were most important for candidates.*

Keywords: *competitive advantage, higher education, image, promotion.*

Introduction

A noticeable phenomenon in Poland is the growing surplus of university places in relation to the number of applicants and intensifying competition for students (Michno, Lib, 2019). Universities forced to fight to maintain their position, and often even to survive in the market, are verifying their current methods of operation by, among other things, reducing operating costs, but also looking for more effective methods of competition (Azoury, Daou, Khoury, 2014). Classic methods (competing with the program offer, its quality and price) are no longer sufficient. Intangible resources are increasingly becoming the leading differentiator of universities (Miotto, del Castillo, Blanco-Gonzales, 2020). Since universities of a given type have a similar offer of majors and specializations (curricula of about 50% shaped by teaching standards), the image - next to the price - becomes a factor influencing the attitude of a future student to evaluate the offer and make a choice. Increasingly, therefore, universities are taking steps to create a desirable image and, on this basis, shape their operating and development strategies (Sojkin & Golata, 2020) This is a multi-faceted

process, because image creation affects the quality of the functioning of the entire institution (Kotler, Armstrong, Saunders, Wong, 2002). In order for these differentiators to fulfill their primary task and contribute to a competitive advantage in the market, they must be effectively positioned in the minds of the public (Altkorn, 2004)

The components of identity are not obvious to all people who are in the field of interest of the organization, so its goal should be to communicate the identity as accurately as possible. The main purpose of this paper is to analyze what image factors are decisive when deciding on the choice of a university, and whether there is a difference between the images of public and non-public universities? The paper verifies the following specific research hypotheses:

H1. Image and price are the two most important considerations in choosing to study at a particular university.

H2. There are differences between public and non-public universities in terms of image structure.

Evaluation of factors influencing the choice of public and non-public universities. Research results

The starting point for the selection of the sample was the ranking of "Perspektywy" universities containing a list of 102 universities (Perspektywy, 2020) From the ranking, economic universities were selected by creating two lists: public economic universities and non-public economic universities. The survey was conducted among Polish economic universities according to the criterion of place in the ranking of "Perspektywy" magazine. From the ranking, a list of public universities (P) and a list of non-public universities (N) were selected. A stratified, single-stage random drawing was used (population elements were drawn once), with no returns, i.e. each university could be drawn only once. The survey covered first-year students beginning their studies at a given university in the number of 30 - 35 students/university. A total of 18 universities were surveyed: 9 public and 9 non-public. Students were given links to the questionnaire. In the end, 630 students completed the questionnaire digitally. 300 from non-public universities and 330 from public universities. In addition, each list (i.e. the list of public universities and the list of non-public universities) were divided into 3 groups: P-1 top ranked public universities in the ranking, P-2 middle ranked public universities, P-3 final ranked public universities) and N-1 top ranked non-public universities in the ranking, N-2 middle ranked non-public universities, N-3 final ranked non-public universities.

Qualitative research is quite commonly used in image research, as it allows to capture associations and attitudes associated with the university. However, due to the objectives set and the scope of the study, it was decided that in this case quantitative methods would be more appropriate. An online questionnaire was

designed, for first-year students, with open, semi-open and closed questions. The form included a metric to verify important data for the reliability of the study, including the name of the university, field of study, full-time or part-time mode, year and gender of respondents. Deciding on the choice of a university is usually a lengthy process in which various elements are taken into account. First-year students at all surveyed universities were asked which identity anchors most influenced their choice of university. The factors were rated on a point scale from 1 to 5 (where: 1- unimportant importance, 2 - low importance, 3- fairly high importance, 4 - high importance, 5 - very high importance, most important). The results are presented in several levels: for the surveyed universities in general, for the surveyed public universities and for the surveyed non-public universities.

Results for all universities combined. The results for all surveyed universities in total show the following structure of responses (Tab.1):

- the highest rating (above 4) was given to two factors: the majors and specialties offered (4.27) and the chances for a good job in the future (4.11). Thus, these are important factors for potential students, largely influencing their choice of university,
- below the rating of 4, but above 3.5 were such factors as: high level of teaching (3.82), reputation (good opinion) of the university (3.67), location of the university (3.6), friendly approach of lecturers to the student (3.56).

The results show that students primarily look for a university that is in line with their vision of their future profession and that offers job opportunities. They further take into account the level of teaching and reputation, i.e. the prevailing opinions about a particular university. The top five most highly rated factors also include the location of the university. Among the factors rated as rather important were: modern teaching methods, good opinions on the qualifications of the scientific and teaching staff, practical training, the level of foreign language teaching, the lack of an entrance exam and attractive material base of the university. Of low importance are, among others: the possibility of realizing part of the studies abroad, the positive, strong presence of the university in the media, the possibility of studying in English, the rating given to the university by the Polish Accreditation Commission and the positive assessment of the amount of tuition fees in relation to other universities. The university's advertising campaign was considered an insignificant factor, and it received the lowest score (1.92). In light of these results, it can be concluded that the university's advertising campaign has little influence on the decisions made by university applicants. An analysis of the responses given by first-year students of the surveyed public universities shows that the most important factors in choosing a public university are the chances of a good job in the future (4.25) and the fields of study and specialties (4.24). At the same time, these are the same factors that were considered important in the survey of all students. Also repeated in the top five

are high level of teaching, reputation and location as rather important factors. A number of factors received a score of less than 2, meaning that their importance is low. These include the university's presence in the media, the opinion of parents, the rating given to the university by the Polish Accreditation Commission, the university's advertising campaign, a positive assessment of the amount of tuition fees in relation to other universities, and the possibility of studying in English.

Table 1 Factors influencing the decision to choose a university - results for students of the surveyed universities in a cross-section of public and non-public universities (compiled by authors)

Factors influencing the choice of universities	Universities overall	Public universities	Non public universities
Education directions and specialties	4,27	4,24	4,29
Opportunities for a good job in the future	4,11	4,25	4,02
High level of teaching	3,82	3,97	3,72
Reputation (good reputation) of the university	3,67	3,96	3,52
Location of the university	3,60	3,65	3,57
Friendly approach of lecturers to the student	3,56	3,02	3,87
Modern didactic methods	3,41	3,06	3,63
Good opinions on the qualifications of the scientific and teaching staff	3,35	3,02	3,55
Practical education	3,34	2,95	3,57
Level of foreign language teaching	3,24	3,01	3,38
No entrance exam	2,97	2,67	3,15
Attractive material base of the university	2,96	2,79	3,07
Recommendation of a friend or other person	2,95	3,04	2,90
Scientific achievements of scientific and teaching staff	2,91	2,48	3,17
The place occupied by the university in press rankings	2,87	2,96	2,82
Opportunity to pursue your interests in other areas at the university	2,80	2,86	2,77
Opportunity to pursue part of your studies abroad	2,49	2,47	2,50
Positive, strong presence of the university in the media	2,38	1,98	2,65
Ability to study in English	2,23	1,68	2,57
Rating given to the university by the Polish Accreditation Commission	2,22	1,95	2,41
Positive assessment of tuition fees in relation to other universities	2,22	1,72	2,54
Parents' opinion	2,06	1,96	2,12
University advertising campaign	1,92	1,78	2,00

Factors considered important in choosing a school are, in the opinion of students of non-public schools, the fields of study and specialties (4.29) and the chances for a good job in the future (4.02). The results in this regard coincide with the opinion of students of public universities (Tab. 2). This shows that regardless of the type of university, potential university candidates first analyze the fields of study offered by the school and the extent to which studying at a given university will increase the chances of getting a good job. Students of non-public schools attribute greater importance than students of public schools to such factors as price (2.54, in public universities 1.72) which can be linked to the full payment of full-time and part-time studies in non-public universities. Higher ratings were also given to modern teaching methods (3.63, in public universities 3.06) or the opportunity to study in English (2.57, in public universities 1.68). Based on this, it can be concluded that students perceive non-public universities as using more modern teaching methods and offering studies in English to a greater extent than public universities. A lower rating is given to reputation (3.52), which ranked ninth out of 23 evaluated factors (3.96 in the assessment of public university students). Thus, reputation is more important in choosing a public university.

Table 2 The five most important factors in choosing a public university (compiled by authors)

The five most important factors in public universities from the first ranking group	Rating (average descending)
Education directions and specialties	4,52
Opportunities for a good job in the future	4,43
Level of foreign language teaching	4,08
High level of teaching	4,04
Location of the university	3,82
The five most important factors in public universities from the second ranking group	Rating (average descending)
Reputation (good reputation) of the university	4,58
Chances for a good job in the future	4,50
High level of teaching	4,25
Education directions and specialties	4,16
Place occupied by the university in press rankings	3,91
The five most important factors in public universities from the third ranking group	Rating (average descending)
Chances for a good job in the future	4,50
Reputation (good reputation) of the university	4,41
Education directions and specialties	4,25
High level of teaching	4,09
Location of the university	3,91

In summary, the most important factors in choosing a public university (regardless of its ranking) were: fields of study and specialties, chances for a good

job in the future, and a high level of teaching. The reputation and location of the school were also highly rated. On the other hand, the most important factors in choosing a non-public university (regardless of its place in the ranking) were such factors as: education majors and specialties and chances for a good job in the future. Thus, the same two factors were considered decisive for both public and non-public university applicants.

The results indicate that students treat their studies as an investment in their future position in the labor market. The advantage, therefore, goes to a reputable university that offers university candidates the fields of study they are looking for, provides quality education, increases their chances of finding a job, and has a good location.

Discussion

Reputation is more important for public schools (3.96) than for non-public schools (3.52), which may be related to the longer tradition of public universities and, consequently, their greater recognition. However, it also has a strong influence on the selection of non-public universities from the first places in the ranking (the second most important factor with an average score of 4.28). In both types of schools, students expect a high level of teaching (overall rating of 3.82, including 3.97 in public universities and 3.72 in non-public universities). The friendly attitude of lecturers toward students is also important (overall rating of 3.56), although this factor was much more important in non-public universities (3.87) than in public universities (3.02). This is probably related to the fact that non-public universities are more concerned than public ones with attracting and retaining an adequate number of students (tuition fees for non-public universities are an important source of funding for studies). Candidates also pay attention to modern didactic methods (3.41), the level of foreign language teaching (3.24) and whether the university educates practically (3.34). In both types of schools, recommendation is important (rating of 2.95, including 3.04 in public universities and 2.90 in non-public universities), which indicates that positive opinions about the university influence the choice of candidates. The leading factors determining the choice of a university in the cross-section of the type of university are similar, but in the case of non-public schools, aspects of credibility (PKA rating, recommendations, opinions on the qualifications of the staff) and those related to a more modern, practical approach (practical education, foreign languages, modern teaching methods) are more important. The above analysis is supplemented by the students' responses to the open-ended question in the questionnaire: "What, in your opinion, prompted your fellow students to study at alternative universities?". The obtained answers (41 statements of students from public schools, 58 statements of students from non-public schools) were grouped

into categories according to the criterion of similarity. Thus, the following factor structure was obtained:

- tuition fees - 31 responses (10 P, 21 N),
- reputation (prestige) - 26 responses (16 P, 10 N),
- opinion of friends - 10 responses (5 P, 5 N),
- location (close to home) - 7 responses (4 P, 3 N),
- direction of study - 7 responses (4 P, 3 N),

In light of the results, it can be concluded that the answers to the open-ended question confirmed the importance of the most important factors influencing the choice of university.

A special group of factors affecting the image of the institution is the relationship of potential students with the administrative staff of the university, primarily the staff of the enrollment desk and the dean's office. Focus research at two universities (public and non-public) identified factors that determine the quality of service of these units (Tab.3, Tab.4). The responses received indicated such evaluation factors as competence, friendliness, being helpful, providing comprehensive answers and convincingly encouraging the choice of a particular university. This range of responses was included in the questionnaire for first-year students. In light of the results, it can be concluded that the quality of service provided by the enrollment center and dean's office is rated higher in non-public universities than in public universities. This difference persists when comparing the ranking groups (P-1 with N-1, P-2 with N-2, P-3 with N-3). Comparing the ratings obtained by public and non-public universities from the first ranking group, one can notice a clear advantage of non-public in the level of realization of such qualities as kindness and being helpful. Such a situation may be due to the fact that non-public universities attach more importance to relationship marketing, and place more emphasis on building the right relationship by front - line staff.

*Table 3 Enrollment point assessment by first-year students at public universities¹
(compiled by authors)*

Distinctive features of the recruitment point	P - 1	P- 2	P-3
They are competent	3,69	4,08	4,08
They are friendly	3,56	3,83	4,08
They are helpful	3,47	3,75	3,91
They provide comprehensive information	3,47	3,66	3,91
They encourage you to choose this school	3,47	3,33	3,75

¹ Designations P- 1, P-2, P-3 - are public universities from the first, second and third ranking groups, respectively.

Table 4 Evaluation of the work of the recruitment point by first-year students of non-public universities ²(compiled by authors)

Distinctive features of the recruitment point	N- 1	N-2	N - 3
They are competent	4,33	4,37	4,04
They are friendly	4,30	4,42	4,01
They are helpful	4,30	4,43	3,96
They provide comprehensive information	4,20	4,20	3,87
They encourage you to choose this school	3,96	4,01	3,85

It is also worth noting that within the ranking groups, universities from the first ranking group (P-1) are the weakest. They were rated lower in this area than universities from the second and third ranking groups (P-2, P-3). On this basis, it can be concluded that the top economic public universities focus less than other schools on building a satisfactory relationship with a potential student (Tab. 4).

Table 5 Evaluation of the work of the dean's office by first-year students of public universities (compiled by authors)

Distinctive features of the dean's office	P - 1	P- 2	P-3
They are competent	3,86	4,00	4,00
They are friendly	3,54	3,66	3,54
They provide comprehensive information	3,22	3,58	3,45
They are helpful	3,22	3,50	3,45
They encourage you to choose this school	3,18	3,41	3,36

Table 6 Evaluation of the work of the dean's office by first-year students of non-public universities (compiled by authors)

Distinctive features of the dean's office	N-1	N-2	N-3
They are competent	4,33	4,23	3,88
They are friendly	4,33	3,90	3,77
They provide comprehensive information	4,20	3,92	3,69
They are helpful	4,10	4,04	3,66
They encourage you to choose this school	3,90	3,64	3,61

² Designations N- 1, N-2, N-3 - are non-public universities from the first, second and third ranking groups, respectively.

Summary

The results of primary research conducted at eighteen economic universities in Poland, as well as the results of the preceding secondary research, presented in this chapter, made it possible to verify the underlying hypotheses. Synthetic conclusions are presented in the following conclusions.

Hypothesis No. 1 assumes that image factors and price are the two most important reasons for studying at a given university, and that image is a particularly important source of building a university's competitive advantage. In turn, from the point of view of students assessing the importance of factors influencing the choice of a university, the most important are the qualitative characteristics of the offer, the school's reputation, friends' recommendation, price and location. Image - in the approach adopted in the dissertation - understood as the perception of identity characteristics among the target groups of universities is of primary importance. The research shows that there are clear expectations about the needs that a university should meet. Schools that build their strategy on such identity anchors as high quality of education, faculties that increase the chances of finding a job, and student orientation (practical teaching, individualization of studies, modern didactic methods, cooperation with the environment, friendly approach) have a significantly higher chance of attracting students, and thus of surviving.

Hypothesis 2 assumes that there are differences between public and non-public universities in terms of image structure. Our own research only partially confirmed this hypothesis. Both public and non-public university students considered the following as the most important factors influencing their choice of university: fields of study and specializations, chances for a good job in the future, and a high level of education. The main motives for choosing a public university were chances for a good job in the future (4.25), education majors and specialties (4.24), high level of teaching (3.97), reputation (3.96) and location (3.65). On the other hand, the main motives for choosing a non-public university are education majors and specialties (4.29), chances for a good job in the future (4.02), friendly attitude of lecturers towards the student (3.87), high level of teaching (3.72) and modern teaching methods (3.63). In light of the survey, it can be seen that the factors that determine the choice of universities are similar, but in the case of non-public schools, aspects of credibility (PKA rating, opinions on the qualifications of the staff) and aspects related to a more modern, practical approach (practical education, foreign languages, modern teaching methods) and a friendly approach to the student are more important.

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