



## **MARKETING DETERMINANTS OF THE CHOICE OF FIELD OF STUDIES**

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### Summary

The aim of presented considerations is to answer the following research question: Which elements of universities' marketing activities have greatest impact on recruiting new students? This research question derives from the necessity to unveil hints on what marketing activities are most effective in gaining a number of new students that complies with a university's strategy. Moreover, the obtained answer will be juxtaposed with the new way Polish universities are to function after changes introduced by Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education in academic year 2016/2017. Own research was conducted among students of Department of Sport and Tourism Management at The Jerzy Kukuczka Academy of Physical Education in Katowice recruited in academic year 2016/2017. Obtained data revealed that among all conducted marketing activities promotion is the one that had greatest impact student's choice of a university and faculty.

**Keywords:** universities, marketing, promotion, recruitment, higher education



## Introduction

The beginning of the 21st century in Poland, from the point of view of the level of education, was characterized by strong determination of young people to continue their education process after graduating from high school. This is shown by the figures reported by the Central Statistical Office (GUS). According to the data, in November 2015 in Poland there were over 1,4 million students and following the end of the academic year 2014/15 almost 400,000 university graduates entered the labour market<sup>1</sup>. What has been one of the incentives for continuing education at universities up till now is the current system of education at lower levels based mostly on high schools — in the school year 2014/2015 high schools constituted almost a half (45,6%) of all schools above the level of junior high schools, while technical schools and arts schools constituted almost a third (29,1%) and vocational schools constituted a quarter (25,2%)<sup>2</sup>. Young people graduating from high schools have a broad scope of knowledge from various areas, without focus on any future profession. This leads to the necessity to look for specialization and professional focus on the level of higher education. Additionally, a well developed system of state universities, characterized by lack of tuition fees at full-time studies, created favourable conditions for the fashion for higher education.

It is no coincidence that the above remarks are formulated in past tense, as the academic year 2016/2017 brought new solutions introduced by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education. One of the basic changes introduced on the basis of the resolution<sup>3</sup> was the change of the algorithm used to determine the level of financing from the state budget for universities. Without looking into the details of new regulations, the most important effect of the change for universities is the following: the number of students is not a significant factor influencing the level of financing from the Ministry any more. What plays an important role now is the ratio of the number of students to the number of academic teachers employed at a university. Universities where the number of students per one employee amounts to 13 are in the best situation. The higher the ratio, the lower the value of ministry's subsidies for the functioning of a university. The following are the potential consequences of the new rules for defining the value of financing:

- universities will decide to reduce the number of students by reducing recruitment limits, which means smaller number of high-school graduates will be enrolled;
- universities willing to improve their ratio of the number of students to the number of employees will be forced to raise employment.

The purpose of this solution is reducing the number of people with higher education entering the labour market every year, which with the simultaneous development of the network of vocational and technical schools should encourage young people to learn professional skills already at the medium level of education. Additionally, thanks to reduced recruitment limits and reduced number of new students, new students will be better prepared in terms of the requirements of a particular university and faculty, which in turn may lead to improving the quality of education and higher level of preparation of graduates for future duties.

This brings about the question which may be treated as an ancillary research issue — Will it still be necessary for universities to conduct marketing activities, especially promotional activities, in order to attract new students? Up till now, when higher number of students generated additional revenues for universities, universities took measures aimed at presenting their offer to the possibly highest number of potential clients. For this reason the actions taken by universities associated with the intention to identify factors decisive for the choice of university and the area of studies had to be treated as appropriate. Activities of this kind in form of marketing research were carried out at the Faculty of Sports and Tourism Management of the Academy of Physical Education in Katowice at the beginning of the academic year 2016/2017. The obtained results were supposed to be used for the planning of the Faculty's activities associated with student recruitment in the following years.

Both for the main research problem and the ancillary problem research hypotheses were formulated. The main research hypothesis is as follows: marketing activities which influence the acquisition of new students the most are activities associated with direct promotion and PR, such as promotion in schools, or open door events. In case of the ancillary hypothesis we should assume that despite the introduced changes in the financing of universities, conducting marketing activities aimed at

potential students will still be necessary, but it will require the change of used forms and means. The verification of hypotheses formulated this way will be conducted on the basis of the results of own research and an overview of literature.

## **Marketing activity of universities**

Universities, both state-owned universities and private ones are organizations (Griffin, 2013), whose functioning should be based on the utilization of theory and practical knowledge concerning management (Stoner, Freeman and Gilbert, 2011). Every university has its goals and plans associated with them. The implementation of these plans is determined by the resources held by universities and the way they are used. The educational services offered by universities on the market constitute an important, but not the only area of their functioning. Universities, operating on the commercial market, expand the range of offered products. Thus, it seems necessary to appropriately adapt the held offer to the needs voiced by the market. The utilization of marketing activities should serve this purpose (Kotler, 2005). Due to the subject area of this article, in further part of the article attention will be focused on the marketing activity of universities associated with educational services in form of the opportunity to participate in first cycle degree programme.

Student is a consumer who receives from a university a product in form of a service (Czubala et al., 2012). From the marketing perspective, the outcome of this is associated with the marketing mix that can be used, as well as the kinds of means and forms of conducting promotional activities (Pabian, 2008). Enache in his article concerning the marketing activity of universities highlights the need of universities to apply marketing mix 7P. 7P marketing mix includes: product, price, promotion, distribution, personnel physical environment of services and the process of service (Enache, 2011). In case of state-owned universities, at which full-time studies are free of charge, price doesn't constitute an element distinguishing the strategies of particular universities. However, this doesn't mean that a student candidate doesn't take into consideration the

costs associated with the choice of a particular university. These costs may be associated with commuting, the need to secure accommodation, or expenses on devices, or accessories needed to study at a particular faculty. This fact determines the necessity to regard the marketing activity of a university from the perspective of the potential client, which complies with the 4C concept — client, cost, convenience, communication (Pluta-Olearnik and Olearnik, 2015).

Apart from the possibility of utilization of 7P and 4C concepts in the marketing activities conducted by universities, literature on the subject discusses the possibility of using the concept of sustainable marketing. This concept doesn't rely on new methods and marketing techniques, but involves the utilization of well-known actions to achieve not just economic, but also ecological and social goals, according to the concept of sustainable development (Pabian, 2012).

Keeping in mind that universities can adopt various approaches to their marketing activities, we need to remember that comprehensive marketing strategy has an impact on the decisions made by future students. What can confirm this are the results of research published in literature (Al-Fattal, 2010).

It is no coincidence that the title of this article puts emphasis on the marketing determinants of the choice of the area of study, as the authors are aware that not only marketing influences the decisions made by future students. According to survey results published by the Central Statistical Office (GUS) in 2013, almost 43% of students choose an area of study and as a result, a profession, taking into consideration the ability to find work matching their interests, almost 18% aim at raising their competences and almost 18% pointed to the possibility of finding a well-paid job. At the same time over 94% of students claimed that the choice of the area of study is their independent decision<sup>4</sup>. Comments on the results achieved in similar surveys can be found in articles written by W.Jarecki, which show that students choose a particular area of study mainly due to the fact that it matches their interests (69,5%) and because they want to get a good job (60%). Among other answers given by 10.5% or fewer respondents there were: whether it is easy to get a place at a particular university and area of study; the influence of family, teachers, or friends; as well as the intention to extend the duration of studies (Jarecki, 2008; Jarecki 2015). In foreign

literature different factors behind the choice of a university can be found. J. Gaijć mentions the following determinants in his article: process of education (41%), the image of a university (23%), the quality of courses (16%), good terms of employment (13%), location (2%), level of tuition fees (2%) and payment terms (1%) (Gaijć, 2012).

It is also worth asking the question what, from the point of view of marketing, can universities use to attract new students. The correct answer, even though not a very precise one, is the answer pointing to all elements of marketing activity typical of services. A more detailed answer is given in the article by A. Pawłowska, which points to 5 elements which are most often emphasized in promotional messages sent by universities. These are: educational offer, people associated with a university (employees, graduates, students), history, location and elements expanding the offer such as: students associations, scholarships, infrastructure (Pawłowska, 2013). The mentioned elements can easily be associated with particular elements of marketing mix 7P: product — educational offer; distribution — location; personnel — employees; physical environment of services — infrastructure; price (or rather the cost for student as an element of 4C concept) — scholarships. Thus, every element of marketing activity can constitute an element distinguishing a particular university. Nevertheless, it is promotional activities that bear the burden of conveying a message containing chosen elements of the offer to the potential clients. According to the opinion of A. Pabian, universities can use for promotional activities the whole set of instruments of promotion mix, that is, advertising, PR, personal selling, promotion of sales and direct marketing (Pabian, 2002). Not every channel of communication with target markets plays the same role from the point of view of the potential client in the context of acquisition of information.

The situation is similar in case of sources of information used by the potential students in the decision-making process associated with the choice of studies. As it turns out, the most-often used source of information is a university's website (77%), open door events (54%) are the second most popular source, friends and family are the third source (44%), leaflets are the fourth source (37%), next come educational fairs (37%), information derived from high school (22%), articles in the media (21%), advertisement (7%) (Schuller and Rasticowa, 2011).



## Methodology of research

The survey was conducted on the basis of a questionnaire. The respondents filled out the questionnaire personally in course of dealing with the formalities associated with enrolment. The questionnaire consisted of one question associated directly with the research goal and the respondent's particulars. In the section concerning the respondent's particulars, there were questions about the respondent's sex, kind of high school they graduated from (possible answers: high school, technical school, profiled high school), place of residence (possible answers: countryside, town with less than 100,000 inhabitants, cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants). The main question was formulated as follows: What encouraged you the most to start studies at the Faculty of Sports and Tourism Management of the Academy of Physical Education in Katowice? The presented question took the form of a closed question, as the respondents could choose 3 out of 10 proposed answers. Out of these proposed answers two were divided into sub-points. As a result, the sum of all answers won't equal 100%.

Almost all students (96%) admitted to the first cycle studies at the Faculty of Sports and Tourism Management of the Academy of Physical Education in Katowice in the academic year 2016/17 took part in the survey. Eventually, 239 properly filled out questionnaires were obtained. On the basis of these questionnaires it was possible to generate a set of data necessary to verify the main hypothesis. For the purpose of facilitating the presentation of results below the answers provided in the questionnaire will be shown. Out of these answers the respondents chose no more than 3, which in their opinion contributed the most to their choice of the area of study. The presented structure of answers is the same as in the questionnaire:

1. Area of study matching personal interests.
2. Promotional activities conducted by the Academy of Physical Education in Katowice:
  - a) open door events,
  - b) visits of the employees of the Academy of Physical Education to your school,
  - c) information obtained in sports clubs and associations,

- d) educational fairs,
  - e) university's website,
  - f) others
3. Favourable conditions for studying according to individual organization of studies (IOS), or individual programme and plan of studies (IPPS) — offer aimed mostly at athletes.
  4. An attractive offer in the area of specialization.
  5. Interesting programme of studies with the possibility of choosing subjects of a fitness-related character using the infrastructure of the university.
  6. The possibility of continuing studies at second cycle programmes.
  7. Location of the university close to the place of residence.
  8. The fact that successful athletes are students, or graduates of the university.
  9. The decisive factor behind the choice of the university was:
    - a) parents' opinion,
    - b) teachers' opinion,
    - c) the opinion of friends studying at the university.
  10. No clear reason.

## Results

131 men and 108 women participated in the survey. Vast majority of the respondents are graduates of high schools — 161 people. At the same time 68 people graduated from technical schools and 10 people graduated from profiled high schools. With regard to the place of residence, 45 respondents answered that they live in the countryside, 81 live in towns with less than 100,000 inhabitants and 113 live in cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants.

Table 1 presents the respondents' answers concerning the reason why they started studies at the Faculty of Sports and Tourism Management of the Academy of Physical Education in Katowice. The answers are presented as percentage and their descending sequence reflects the obtained results. Additionally, the table presents the distribution of answers among men and women.

Table 1. Factors encouraging respondents to choose studies at the Faculty of Sports and Tourism Management of the Academy of Physical Education in Katowice

Answers (numeration adequate to the numeration presented in the methodological part)	§ In all	§ Men	§ Women
1	57.7%	60.6%	54.5%
2	53.2%	48.8%	58.0%
9	46.0%	44.1%	48.2%
4	33.1%	30.7%	35.7%
7	22.2%	26.8%	17.0%
3	18.8%	18.9%	18.7%
6	17.2%	21.3%	12.5%
5	15.1%	13.4%	17.0%
8	9.6%	11.0%	8.0%
10	5.4%	6.3%	4.5%

Source: Own materials based on the results of research.

Looking at the data presented in Table 1, it is necessary to pay attention to the fact that in case of answer 2 (Promotional activities conducted by the Academy of Physical Education in Katowice) and 9 (someone's opinion was decisive for the choice of the university), the presented percentages constitute the sum of percentages achieved by particular sub-points mentioned in this response in the questionnaire. In case of the second answer particular sub-points obtained the following results:

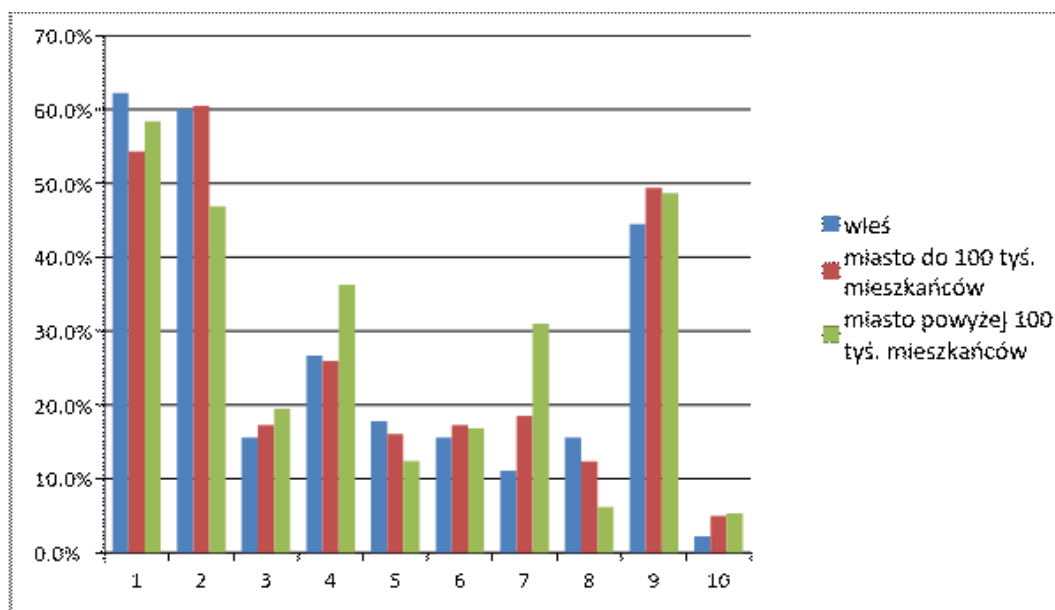
- a) open door events at the university — 5.4%;
- b) the visit of employees of the Academy of Physical Education in Katowice to your school — 1.7%;
- c) information obtained in sports clubs and associations — 13.4%;
- d) educational fairs — 4.2%;
- e) university's website — 24.3%
- f) others — 4.2%

In case of response number 9 the respondents' answers are as follows:

- a) parents' opinion — 5.9%;
- b) teachers' opinion — 0.4%;
- c) opinion of friends/people studying at the university — 39.7%.

Chart 1 presents the distribution of answers to the only question included in the survey questionnaire with a division into the respondents' place of residence.

Chart 1. Factors encouraging respondents to choose studies at the Faculty of Sports and Tourism Management of the Academy of Physical Education in Katowice, with a division into the place of residence



Source: Own materials prepared on the basis of survey results.

Analysing Table 1 in terms of the differences between the answers given by men and women, it is necessary to point out that there is no case in which the difference exceeds 10%. The highest difference in percentages appears in case of the influence of promotional activities on the decisions

made by women and men (women more often mention promotional activity as a factor influencing the decisions they make concerning the choice of a particular faculty), at the same time location of the university has been mentioned as a factor influencing the decision concerning the choice of the Faculty of Sports and Tourism Management by 10% more men than women. In case of the comparison of answers given by respondents from different places of residence — Chart 1, the biggest differences can be observed also in case of the location of the university (it is of greatest importance for people living in big cities), and promotional activities, which for this group of respondents are less significant than for the two remaining groups.

## Summary

The results of the conducted survey show that the most common incentive for starting studies at the Faculty of Sports and Tourism Management is the fact that the area of study matches the interests of students. This matches the results of the research conducted by W.Jarecki mentioned in the article. These interests are the results of the influence of environments that the potential students come from, their upbringing and individual experiences. These interests are shaped over many years, so it is hard to presume that universities could influence these interests in a highly efficient way. That's why from the perspective of marketing activities it is important to identify the interests of young people studying in high schools by means of marketing research and on this basis to adapt the educational offer to the leading expectations of future students. What may hamper the efficient adaptation of a university is its specific character, that's why decisions on new, or the modification of existing areas of study should be adapted to the implemented strategy.

Taking into consideration the particular answers forming the total result of a university's promotional activities (point 2) and the opinions of third persons (point 9), the second place was occupied by the opinion of friends studying at the university. This points to the influence of word-of-mouth marketing on the decisions of every fourth student. This leads to the

question what has an impact on the formation of positive opinions of students and graduates of a particular faculty and why they are willing to recommend a particular faculty to their friends. From the point of view of the theory of marketing, we can assume that what plays a role here is the offered product, or more precisely, components of particular elements of the structure of a product and its quality. In case of striving to intentionally take advantage of the opportunity that word-of-mouth marketing gives in the process of obtaining student candidates, it is worth analysing the way of building and maintaining relationships with the current students, as these relationships may be important from the point of view of inspiring word-of-mouth marketing.

The third, most often mentioned reason for the choice of the analysed faculty is attractive offer in the area of specialization. This factor is associated with the interests of students, which have been discussed in greater detail above. The first answer associated with promotional activities placed only fourth. It is Internet website, which placed first among the sources of information about university in the mentioned research conducted by D. Schüller, M. Rašticová. With regard to the main research hypothesis, which suggests that the marketing activities which influence the acquisition of new students the most are activities associated with direct promotion and PR, such as promotion in schools, or open door events, it is necessary to point out that the obtained results of research don't confirm the hypothesis formulated this way. The reason for this is the fact that both answers mentioned in the hypothesis achieved a total result of just 7.1%.

It is necessary to realize that the survey sample came from just one university, so we cannot generalize and extend the conclusions from the obtained results to other universities. At the same time, the obtained results constitute an important hint for the authorities of the faculty taken into consideration during research in the context of future marketing activity and can constitute a source of research hypotheses for similar research taking into consideration the representatives of various universities..

The number of articles devoted to the need of universities to resort to marketing activities, including promotion, suggests that we should regard universities in the 21st century from the perspective of the rules of the market (Pawłowska, 2013), where supply should be adapted to the

demand resulting from the needs of consumers. On this market there is also strong competition, which should encourage managers to achieve advantages in areas regarded as strategic. One of such areas is the quality of education which determines whether graduates are prepared for future duties and shapes the university's image (Krzyżak, 2009). In this context it is necessary to realize that one of the factors influencing the final preparation of graduates are the competences they have at the start of the academic education process. This means that the more prepared candidates a university obtains, the higher the chance that the university will introduce well-prepared specialists in particular areas into the labour market. With regard to the changes in higher education introduced in 2017 this means universities need to further encourage potential students to start studies at a particular university. The biggest difference is that now marketing activity cannot be focused only on the quantity of students, but should focus on the quality of students. This is associated with the preparation and presentation of an offer that is attractive from the point of view of the most talented high school graduates. It is also associated with such a choice of the channels of communication which limit the mass coverage of messages in exchange for their accuracy.

The presented deliberations make it necessary to accept the presented ancillary hypothesis, as universities should still conduct marketing activities, including promotional activities, taking into consideration new conditions under which they will have to operate. It is because it is necessary to realize that smaller scale of recruitment to state universities may contribute to greater interest in private universities. As a result, differences in marketing strategies implemented by state and private universities may become apparent, which can be verified in course of further recruitments.

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