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**THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DIRECT CONTACTS
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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DIRECT CONTACTS IN THE PROCESS OF BUILDING RELATIONS WITH STUDENT CANDIDATES

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Summary

In the second decade of the 21st century the graduates of high schools — student candidates — already belong to the next generation, called generation "Z". This generation has been raised in the virtual world. Constant and unlimited access to the Internet leads to a situation in which it constitutes the most important communication channel and a source of information about the world surrounding them. Appreciating the significance of modern technologies and their role in building relations with student candidates, we can't forget about the significance of direct contacts. For those facing the choice of university, which to a large extent may determine the kind of future professional career, communication in the virtual world, even though necessary, turns out to be insufficient. Meetings with candidates at universities, or high schools, lectures given by academic teachers to high school students, meetings with students, or other forms of direct contacts are still important elements of establishing and building relations with potential student candidates. The goal of this article is highlighting the significance of direct meetings in the process of establishing and building relations between a university and potential student candidates. To carry out the assumed goal a quantitative research on a group of high school students was carried out by means of the technique of auditorium questionnaire. On the basis of obtained results it was concluded that in the context of looking for information about the offer of universities young people from high schools expect direct meetings. What attracts particular attention are visits to universities, during which young people get the opportunity to participate in various activities. What turned out to be an important element of building direct relations were contacts with the students of a particular university. As the results of research have shown, it is worth engaging university students more often in the communication activities of universities.

Keywords: student candidates, generation "Z", building relations, direct communication, direct meetings, experiences

Introduction

In the process of building and strengthening market position universities implement marketing strategies and within their frameworks also communication strategies. By attracting talented student candidates universities can build the strength of their own brands. Thanks to talented students universities can gain support and be proud of positions in business achieved by their graduates. They can also obtain funds from companies run by graduates. Along with many other instruments, universities also use marketing communication instruments (Nowaczyk, Sobolewski, 2011). Marketing communication is a complex area, which is subject to changes under influence of technological development, as well as generational transformations (Wiktor, 2013). Along with these factors also many other lead to the situation in which people have to adapt to the environment (Mazurek, 2018). Going back to the generational issues, it is worth pointing out that university authorities are often represented by the "BB" generation, or "X" generation, while student candidates come from generation "Z" (Skuzza, 2017). All of this means that it is necessary to analyze the efficiency of various communication instruments.

Within the strategy of communication we can distinguish a few groups of tools:

- advertising,
- personal promotion,
- promotion of sales,
- public relations,
- direct promotion.

Within each of these groups there are diversified instruments. With regard to advertising they can be messages on television, radio, in the press, or on billboards. Interviews with the representatives of university authorities, or professors are examples of tools from the area of public relations. Brochures, catalogues, or information booklets are tools classified as sales promotion. At the same time, traditional meetings in high schools, open lectures for young people from high schools are examples of actions from the area of direct communication. Such an area

of university's activity is also called interaction marketing (Pluta-Olearnik, 2017). This group of instruments has a special place among communication tools. This results from both the needs of generation "Z", costs and the efficiency and effectiveness of such activities.

For the purpose of learning the expectations of student candidates at the stage of looking for information about the offer of universities, in the context of establishing direct contacts with the representatives of universities, research on a group of high school students was carried out. By means of a questionnaire survey young people's opinions concerning the preference of forms, places and participants of such meetings were collected. The results of conducted research showed that generation "Z" expects direct contacts with the representatives of universities. The choice of the forms of meetings, both in terms of the place and the participants, as well as particular activities, which are preferred by students, may stimulate the growth of attractiveness of these meetings and higher efficiency in establishing and building relations with potential student candidates.

The significance of direct communication in the process of building relations

People are social beings, which means that they appreciate direct relations (Fabritius, Hagemann, 2017). The already mentioned generation "Z" is building its identity in social media, however, people from the generation are also interested in direct meetings (so-called one to one — O2O — or person to person — P2P). A university, while analyzing the efficiency of various tools of communication should also measure the effectiveness of spending allocated to direct communication. This is generally an expensive instrument, as it requires engaging people who cost more than e.g. sending e-mails to schools. However, information of a mass character doesn't attract as much interest as direct conversation with a university employee. One deepened relationship with another human is worth much more than thousands of likes in social media (Harari, 2014). It is necessary to use the opportunities given by the Internet in the process of getting in touch with student candidates. However, it is also worth enriching these opportunities with various forms of direct communication.

People highly appreciate the possibility of obtaining information from other people (Heath, 2013). What is particularly effective is combining direct communication with the provision of values, evoking emotions which can strengthen relations, as well as with the acquisition of experience (Ohme, 2017). What plays a major role, especially with regard to services, are individual experiences (Boguszewicz-Kreft, 2009). All of this can be achieved by means of various forms of direct communication. However, to make it efficient it becomes necessary to work out a plan of direct meetings with student candidates. Planning allows properly adapting the offer to the needs and expectations of high school students and optimization of the effects in the area of achieving the formulated goals.

Planning the strategy of direct communication in the context of building relations with student candidates

Looking at the process of building relations between universities and students as a process consisting of three stages: pre-sale, sale and post-sale stage, communication with high school students as potential student candidates concerns only the first out of three stages (Drapieńska, 2012).

In course of its promotion strategy a university may make decisions concerning the use of direct communication as a communication tool. When you choose this instrument, you should prepare an action plan in this area, assuming that direct contacts will be carried out in form of meetings with high school students. Regardless of this, universities may also use other methods of direct contact (e.g. education fairs, open door events, events, etc.). At the same time, in course of planning direct meetings with students, it is possible to take into consideration a course of action in following stages:

- the choice of school (schools),
- establishing contact with a school,
- assessing the needs of a school (students),
- the choice of time, place, form of contact,
- the choice of subject scope and personnel,
- assessing the effects of direct contact.

The proposed process of planning direct contacts should be corrected during the implementation of subsequent stages. It may happen that a chosen school won't be interested in such a form of contact. What may also be a problem is arranging the dates. It won't always be possible to find employees able to engage in preparation and handling meetings with high school students. For this reason it is reasonable to start the process of planning in such advance that it is possible to arrange the schedule of future meetings.

Planning the first stage, that is, the choice of a school, should be connected to the results of a diagnosis defined for a university (Rumelt, 2013). What may serve as its basis is an analysis of university students from the point of view of schools that they come from. A university can focus either on the schools that most of its students come from, or on high schools where few graduates are willing to study at the particular university. What may also be important is planning direct contacts either only in general education high schools, or covering also a group of technical colleges. This should be associated with the profile and goal of the university. In the process of choosing schools, it is worth finding out their distance from the university. This is associated with the costs of transport to university, or the costs of transport of university representatives' to a particular high school. During the following stage of the planning process it is necessary to establish contacts with school managements. It is not known in advance which of them will agree to signing an agreement. It is also necessary to assume that in the whole process of planning and organizing direct meetings it is the needs and preferences of high school students that should be a priority. Treating students as partners requires reaching agreement on the form and content of contacts. A university may present a broader offer of lectures (workshops) for students, who can choose from the offer the issues they find important. What may be efficient is organization of workshops in schools, however, this limits the possibility of learning about a university for the high school students. Thus, it is possible to plan the programme in such a way that some meetings take place in high schools and some at the university.

What serves as a conclusion of arrangements is a document signed by the two sides, in which the most important points concerning direct meetings with high school students in schools and at universities are contained.

Looking into the issue of selection of university employees assigned to meetings with students, it is necessary to decide to what extent they will be

professors, assistant professors, or doctoral students. Contact with professors can be perceived as a special value for high school students (professionalism, authority). On the other hand, the age, experience, knowledge gap, as well as the difference in the form of communication may lead to the emergence of various barriers. Young university employees may find it easier to find common ground with high school students. It is also worth taking into consideration engaging the representatives of students who will find it easier to establish relations with students, due to small age difference.

Analyzing the issues of conducting workshops, it is necessary to decide to what extent the workshop will be formal, or informal in character, whether the meeting takes the form of a lecture, workshop, or practice. At this moment it is worth listening to the suggestions of students who will name their preferences concerning the form of a meeting. The organized direct meetings shouldn't lead to the emergence of barriers resulting from the difficulty of understanding of the presented material. On the other hand, the conducted workshops cannot suggest that studies at a particular university don't require effort, or engagement.

The efficiency of direct meetings can be higher, if it is associated with emotional engagement during direct contact. In this area the rule of first impression plays a major role. According to the rule, the employee who goes to a high school, or receives high school students at the university, should prepare appropriately, in order to follow the above rule. The values followed by a university should be contained in the first impression rule (punctuality, appearance, professionalism). In case of a meeting at a particular university the opening of workshops by the dean, or provost may strengthen the effect of the rule of first impression. With regard to the content-related aspect of the workshop, it is important to adapt communication to the high school students' level.

The results of conducted research

The process of building and implementation of a university's promotion strategy should be linked to the analysis and assessment of efficiency and effectiveness (Łodziana-Grabowska, 1996). Efficiency is associated with the assessment of the degree of implementation of a goal. Relating to the stage of planning direct communication, it is necessary to formulate a goal (goals),

which the university plans to achieve (e.g. number of people who decide to study at the university). It is slightly harder to calculate effectiveness, that is, a comparison of costs and results. While costs can be estimated, it is harder to calculate the effects. However, it will be important to look for ways and instruments to measure the achieved effects. Information of this kind makes it possible to improve promotion tools in the future. Regardless of the above it is also worth taking into consideration the use of other ways of efficient communication with the potential students. It is possible to oblige employees to write reports on the conducted meetings. What may also be valuable is collecting students' opinions on the conduct of direct meetings, on the basis of a prepared survey questionnaire. What may also be a source of information is qualitative research on students, school administration, teachers and students' parents. What may also be helpful are the results of independent research projects carried out in schools, among students, as well as teachers.

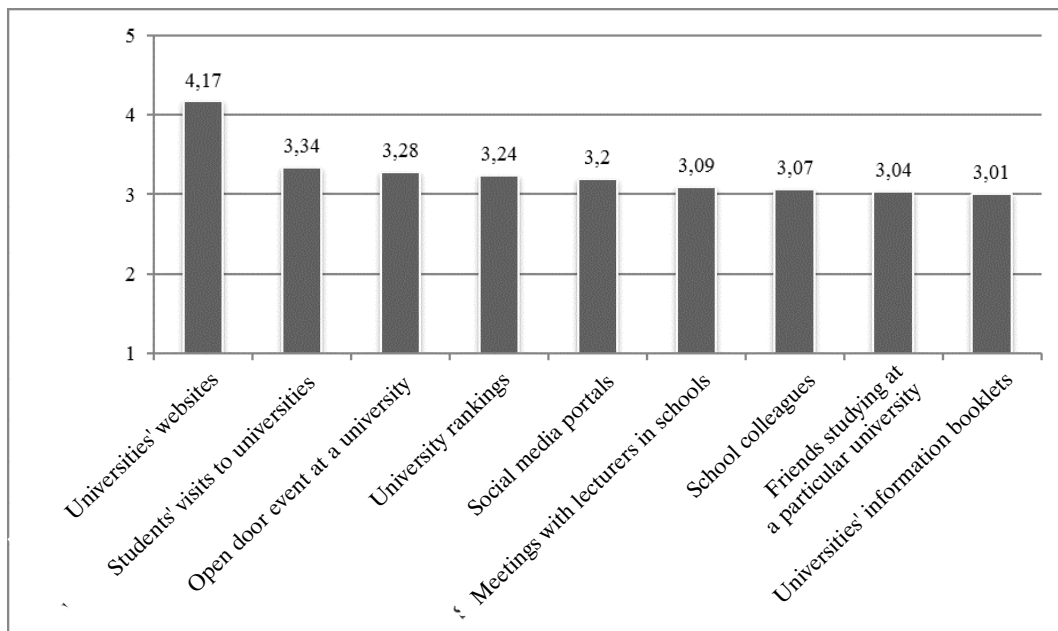
In the latter part of the article the results of such research projects conducted among high school students are presented. They made it possible to take a critical view of earlier discussed conditions for the process of planning and implementing the strategy of direct communication conducted in high schools by universities.

The goal of identification of the needs of high school students associated with establishing direct relations with the representatives of universities a qualitative research on the students of general education high schools was carried out. The research covered the representatives of high schools in Poznań, Środa Wielkopolska and Nowy Tomyśl in the second quarter of 2018. The research covered a total of 223 people, out of them 63% were girls and 35% were boys¹. The survey was conducted among the representatives of first (56%) and second grade (44%), taking into consideration that it is this group of recipients that universities will address their communication activities to in the nearest future.² The survey was conducted by means of the technique of auditorium questionnaire.

Respondents' declarations suggest that they all planned to continue their education at a university. Thus, we can make the assumption that high school students planning university education will be looking for information about universities' offer and will express interest in gaining knowledge about the offer, both by means of indirect and direct channels.

Preliminary research results suggest that currently for generation "Z" the Internet remains the most important source of information (Kucharski, Szopa, Halemba, 2017, Drapińska, Gołąb, 2009, Michalak, Mruk-Tomczak, 2018). In the conducted survey students were asked what sources of information they are using, or plan to use during their search for information about universities and their offer. Respondents were asked to mark on a 5-degree scale (from 1 — I use/will be using very rarely to 5 — I use/will be using very often) the frequency of using the named channels of communication. They also had the option to choose "I don't use/I won't be using". The analysis of obtained average assessments may constitute a confirmation of the previously mentioned, available research results. What serves as the main source of information about universities for high school students are above all universities' Internet websites. This channel for acquisition of information as the only named channel received an average assessment exceeding 4 (see chart 1).

Chart 1. Frequency of using particular sources of information (average assessment)



Source: Prepared on the basis of the results of own research.

Chart 1 presented the sources of information that high school students used, or intend to use most often (average frequency of at least 3,00). At the same time, what looks interesting are further communication channels appreciated by students, as it turned out, among them it was direct meetings that were regarded as important. The second appreciated method for collecting information about universities were visits of high school students to universities. Another, equally important source of information are open door events organized at universities. Also the meetings of high school students with university representatives on the premises of high schools turned out to be a precious source of information. These results may confirm that along with the Internet, which is the basic place for establishing relations and searching for information from the perspective of generation "Z", direct contacts constitute an equally important factor for student candidates, shaping their future choices.

In course of direct communication with the representatives of universities, which may constitute an excellent opportunity to draw the attention of future students to a particular university and the start of building relations with them, three forms of such meetings were distinguished:

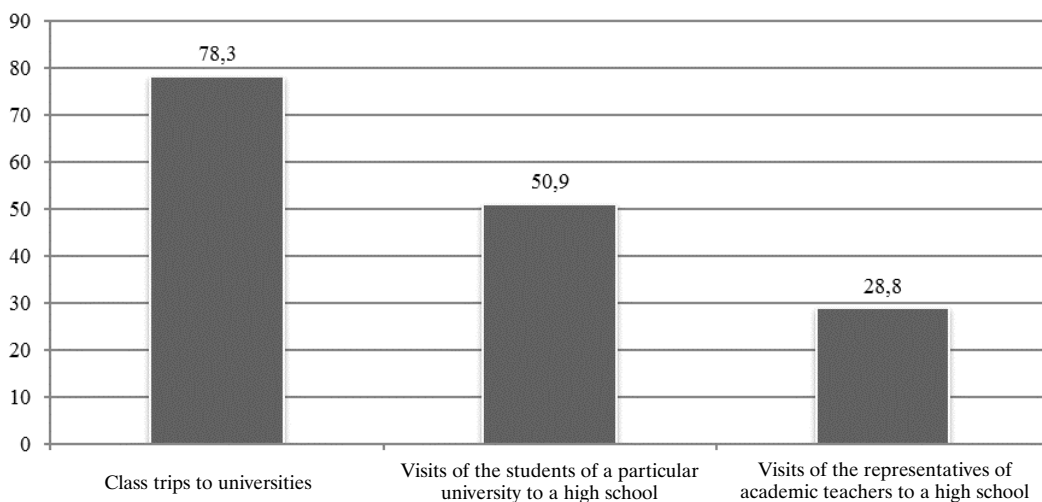
1. visits of the representatives of academic teachers to high schools,
2. visits of the students from a particular university to high schools,
3. class trips to universities.

The division into the visits of academic teachers and students was made on purpose in order to check, whether generational aspects and the differences in the methods of communication associated with them can influence the preferences of respondents. Students could choose more than one of the kinds of direct meetings (see chart 2).

The obtained results point to a clear preference for visiting universities among the students of the surveyed high schools. Almost 80% of respondents recognized this form of direct communication as the most advisable in the process of looking for information about universities. At the same time, a half of the surveyed would also expect meetings in their schools with students — representatives of particular universities. The lowest percentage of high school students displayed interest in meetings with academic teachers in high schools.

It is worth pointing out that almost two times more students preferred meetings with students to meetings with academic teachers. We can look for the reasons for this in differences between generations and the diverse barriers related to them, including communication barriers. Thus, what seem to be an important issue is taking into consideration greater involvement of the students of a particular university in meetings with potential student candidates for the purpose of building relations based more on partnership than on formal relationships like the relationship between the student and the teacher.

Chart 2. Students' preferences with regard to direct meetings (data in %)



Source: Prepared on the basis of the results of own research.

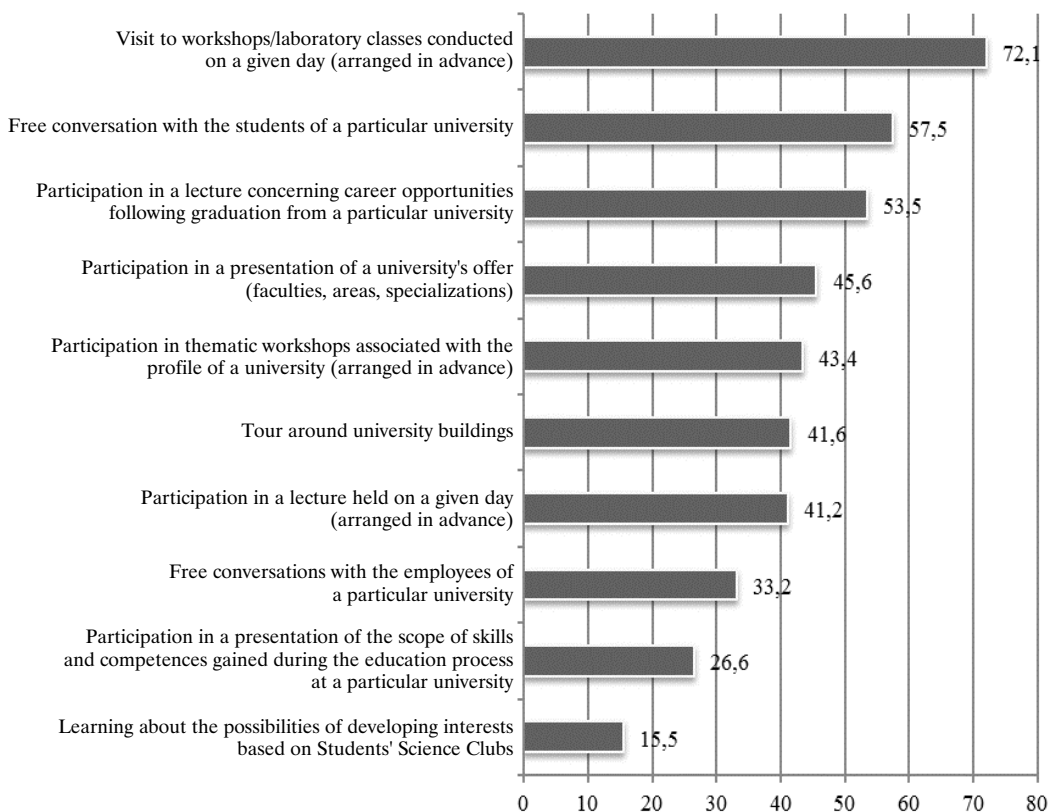
A visit to a university, apart from the possibility of establishing direct communication with the representatives of a university, offers to the high school students many additional benefits. Thus, in course of planning direct meetings with high school students on the premises of a university, it is worth making sure that you prepare such a form of contact, which in the context of needs and expectations of high school students will be their preferred form of communication. When you plan a visit of high school students to a university, you can propose a few elements, which together will secure the provision of comprehensive information to students, but above all will deliver to them unforgettable experiences. Among the forms of such visits we can propose the following:

- high school students' participation in a lecture held on a particular day (arranged in advance),
- short visit to workshop/laboratory class conducted on a particular day (arranged in advance),
- presentation of a university's offer (faculties, areas, specializations),
- presentation of the scope of skills/competences gained during the education process at a particular university,
- lecture concerning career opportunities following graduation from a particular university,
- presentation of the possibilities of developing own interests on the basis of Students' Science Clubs functioning at a university,
- participation in workshops associated with the school profile, or high school students' interests (arranged in advance),
- participation in a meeting and free conversations with the students of a particular university,
- participation in a meeting and free conversations with the teachers from a particular university,
- tours around university buildings.

In course of the conducted surveys the respondents revealed their expectations with regard to the preferred character of such visits, marking the activities that according to them were most interesting (chart 3).

The data obtained in the research suggest that the most desired form of meetings during visits to universities is high school students' participation in workshops, or laboratory classes held on a particular day. Almost two thirds of respondents would expect this element during a visit to a university. At the same time more than a half of respondents would like to meet students and get the opportunity to talk to them freely and to listen to a lecture concerning career opportunities after graduation from a particular university. Career opportunities after graduation from a particular university are now becoming one of the most important criteria for the choice of a particular area of study (Sojkin, Michalak, 2016, Drapińska, 2012). Also participation in the presentation of a university's offer, participation in thematic workshops, tours around university buildings and participation in a lecture held on a given day turned out to be important elements of a visit to a university from the perspective of

Chart 3. Forms of meetings during visits to universities preferred by high school students (data in %)



Source: Prepared on the basis of the results of own research.

potential student candidates. Almost a half of respondents named these forms of direct contacts as an interesting way of spending time during a visit. A slightly smaller percentage of respondents (one third) would also expect to be given an opportunity to talk freely to the representatives of academic teachers. To deepen the analysis of obtained data Mann-Whitney U test was carried out to check whether demographic features substantially differentiated answers. Significant relations were observed with regard to the respondents' sex. Statistically significant differences in answers concerned three answer variants: short visit to workshop/laboratory class held on a given day ($p = 0,00396$), presentation of university's offer ($p =$

0,01661) and tour around university buildings ($p = 0,003111$). These forms were preferred much more often by female, than by male students and these differences turned out to be statistically significant.

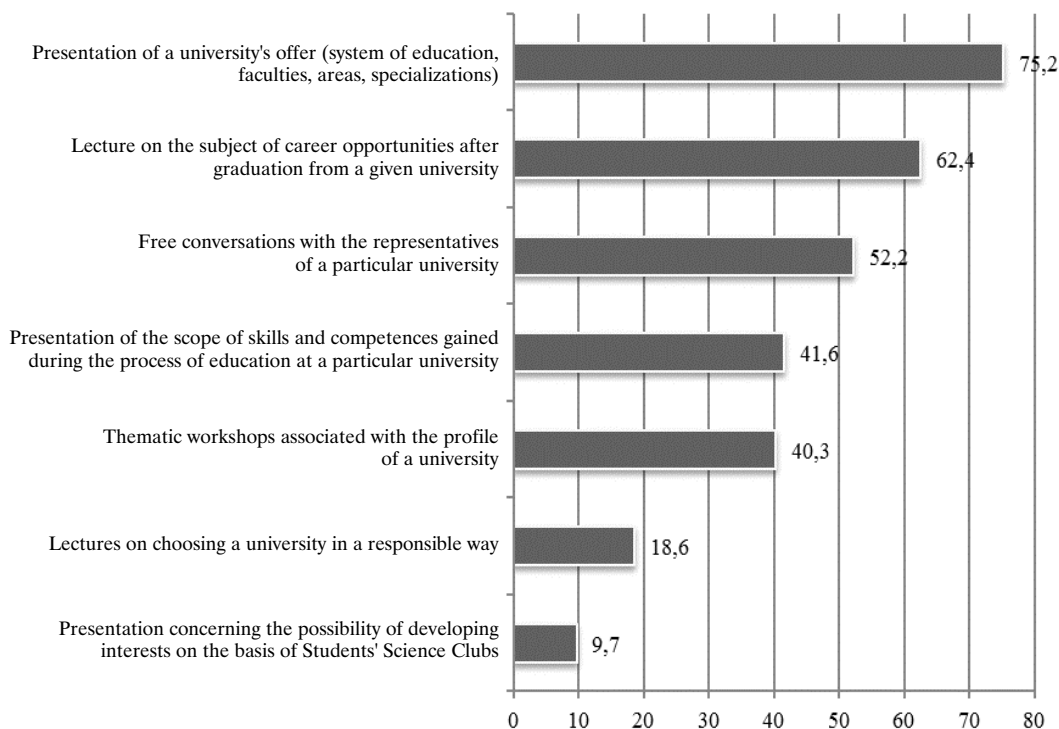
The results presented on chart 3 clearly show that high school students expect a chance to take advantage of a broad offer of opportunities given by a visit to a university. Thus, what turns out to be important is offering high school students diverse forms of establishing direct contacts, which provide many bits of information from various sources and enable building relations with candidates for future students based on partnership and common experience.

Visits of academic teachers to high schools turned out to be the least preferred channel of direct communication among high school students. However, it is worth drawing attention to the fact that such meetings can be prepared on the basis of high school students' expectations and carried out in a form which turns out to be interesting for them. Organizing a visit of university representatives to a high school you can propose many similar kinds of direct contact, like in case of a visit to a university:

- lecture of an academic teacher concerning the responsible choice of a university,
- presentation of a university's offer (system of education, faculties, areas, specializations),
- presentation of the scope of skills and competences obtained during the process of education at a particular university,
- lecture on the subject of career opportunities after graduation from a particular university,
- presentation of the possibility of developing own interests on the basis of Students' Science Clubs functioning at a university,
- thematic workshops associated with the profile of a university (arranged in advance),
- free conversations with the employees and students of a particular university.

According to the obtained results of research concerning the preferences of high school students in the context of expected character of the visits of university representatives to high schools, the future students appreciated diverse forms of such meetings (chart 4).

Chart 4. Forms of meetings during visits of university representatives to high schools preferred by high school students (data in %)



Source: Prepared on the basis of the results of own research.

Data present on chart 4 suggest that high school students during a meeting with the representatives of a university in their school expect in particular detailed information about the offer of a university. They want to learn about the system of education, faculties and the areas of study and specializations offered within faculties. What turned out to be important for more than 60% of respondents was knowledge about career opportunities following graduation from a university, which may constitute a confirmation of the observed trends during the choice of the path of higher education. Just over a half of high school students also expect free conversations with university representatives. In this question the term "university representatives" was used deliberately, as it is not always teachers and/or students who are invited to such meetings.

In many cases high school students meet with administration employees from the marketing department, in course of utilization of the instruments of direct promotion. More than one third of respondents also pointed to the importance of acquiring information about the skills and competences that they get by studying at a particular university. Slightly fewer high school students expressed interest in participation in practical thematic workshops, during which they would be given a chance to gain knowledge about the profile of a given university, faculty, or area of study. The conducted Mann-Whitney U test showed the existence of statistically important differences with regard to the sex of respondents. Significant relationships were observed in case of thematic workshops associated with the profile of a university ($p=0,03509$) and free conversations with the representatives of a given university ($p=0,01478$). These forms were preferred much more often by girls, than by boys and the differences were statistically important.

The results of research presented on chart 4 show that a meeting with student candidates in their school may also take diverse forms and it is worth combining these forms within a single meeting in a high school, so that you can offer high school students a diversified scope of the possibilities of establishing and building relations, thus conveying the message to a broad group of recipients

Summary

The current student candidates are the representatives of generation "Z". Appreciating the role that the Internet plays in the life of these young people, we cannot forget about the importance of direct contacts. An important challenge ahead of older generation is showing young people that communication in the virtual world is a medium with limited capacity for establishing and building durable relations. Direct meetings offer a much broader range of opportunities.

The results of conducted research have shown that young people from high schools are open to direct meetings with university representatives. That's why, even though promotional activities conducted on the Internet are important, we should appreciate more the value of direct

communication. Addressing the expectations of high school students, it seems important to plan cyclical meetings with young people. Planning such actions it is worth reaching for solutions attractive for the recipients — high school students. According to their preferences, a vast majority of such meetings should take the form of high school students' visits to a university. In course of such meetings it is worth offering young people participation in diverse activities. Among these activities the following deserve particular attention:

- visits of high school students to workshops/laboratory classes conducted on a given day at a university,
- free conversations with the representatives of the students of a university,
- young people's participation in a lecture on career opportunities following graduation from a particular university.

An important element which needs consideration, in the context of direct communication with high school students is greater engagement of university students. Direct meetings with university students on the premises of high schools turned out to be a more important element influencing the choices of the future path of development than meetings with academic teachers. This may be related to differences between generations and the intention of generation "Z" to establish relations closer to partnership, rather than formalized relations. Within the framework of meetings held in high schools it is also worth offering various forms of meetings, taking into consideration young people's expectations:

- presentation of a university's offer (faculties, areas, specializations),
- lecture on career opportunities after graduation from a given university,
- free conversations with the representatives of a university.

It is important to consider the available, diverse forms of direct contacts in the context of complementing, rather than competitive forms.

The diversity of positive experiences and emotions during a meeting certainly facilitates establishing good relations with students candidates, which are based on partnership and good cooperation.

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¹ Small size of the research sample doesn't make it possible to draw conclusions and make generalizations about the whole population. However, the obtained results may constitute certain support for making decisions in the context of the choice of tools for building relations with student candidates.

² The survey didn't cover the students of 3rd grades due to the fact that the survey was conducted at the end of the school year and on the one hand it was concluded that this group of students won't be recipients of direct communication activities of universities anymore and on the other hand it was the time of final high school exams and access to this group was hampered.

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