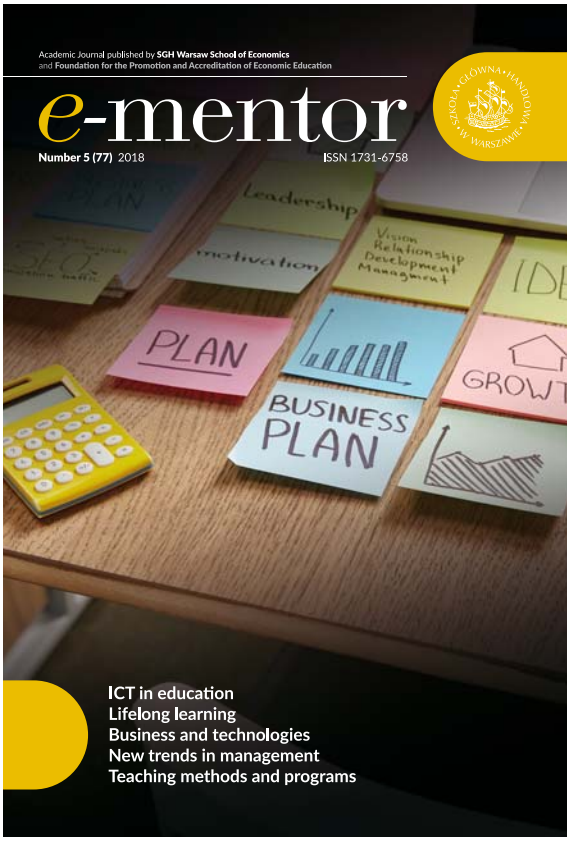
e-mentor
DWUMIESIĘCZNIK SZKOŁY GŁÓWNEJ HANDLOWEJ W WARSZAWIE
WSPÓŁWYDAWCA: FUNDACJA PROMOCJI I AKREDYTACJ KIERUNKÓW EKONOMICZNYCH



2018, nr 5 (77)

Joanna Tabor-Błażewicz, *The Image of a University of Economics from the Perspective of University Candidates – Based on the SGH Warsaw School of Economics*, „e-mentor" 2018, No 5(77), pp. 67–72, http://dx.doi.org/10.15219/em77.1391.

The Image of a University of Economics from the Perspective of University Candidates – Based on the SGH Warsaw School of Economics

Joanna Tabor-Błażewicz[*]

The article addresses the concept of university image and its impact on student satisfaction and loyalty. It discusses the factors connected with the need to build and sustain an appropriate image of a university and offers an original definition of a 'university of choice.' It also presents survey results (over 400 respondents) regarding the image of a Polish university of economics – SGH Warsaw School of Economics – from the perspective of university candidates.

Introduction

University image is every recipient's own, individual notion of a university arising from the information they have learnt about it, whether intentionally or accidentally (Stachura, 2006, p. 362). The notion (opinion) of the environment about a university develops through the confrontation of the messages sent by the university with information from other sources, for instance, one's own experience, other people, competitors or mass media (Krzyżak, 2009, p. 120). Therefore, university image is how the university is seen by its environment, especially in the education market, and more specifically it is the aggregate of subjective notions and of knowledge about the reality that emerged as an outcome of the perceived impact of the communications (Białoń, 2012, p. 368). To sum up, university image is the aggregate of the notions and knowledge about the university that have developed based on the messages communicated by the university to its environment.

The image may consist of a number of elements, for example, the quality of education, the place where the university is based, the academic ethos, the ranking against competition, the economic conditions of learning, the communication with the environment, student life (Stachura, 2006, pp. 362-363). It is worth to mention, that American studies also include athletics/physical education (Arpan, 2003, p. 104), usually left out in European studies. Factors such as reputation or tradition of a university are of importance – they were first listed in the 2005 study involving 630 first-year students from universities of economics in Poznań, Kraków, Katowice and Wrocław and from the SGH Warsaw School of Economics (Oczachowska, p. 170). Other significant image determinants are: ranking against the competition, education quality and level, competencies of the faculty and opinions about the university – as shown in another study, involving 157 students of universities from the Dolnośląskie Province (Ryńca & Miśko, 2016, p. 229).

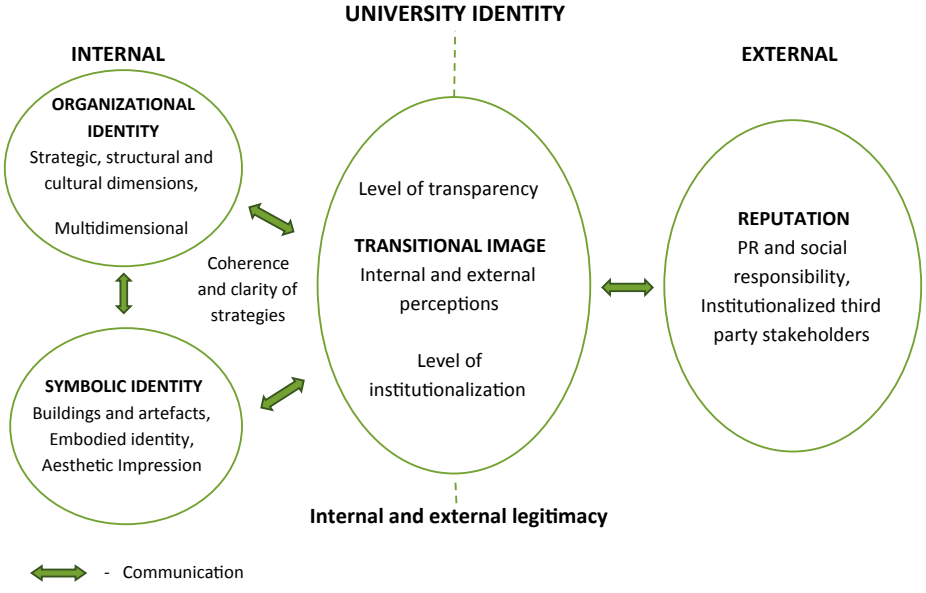
The image is not given once and for all, but it changes depending on various factors and developments taking place both within the university and in its surroundings, among competitors.

University image functions in combination with the identity and reputation of the university, and the correlations between them as shown in the multi-dimensional model developed by L. Steiner, A.C. Sundström and K. Sammalisto (Figure 1). The internal area comprises organizational identity (strategic, structural and cultural dimensions) and symbolic identity, expressed for instance through buildings, artefacts and aesthetic impressions. The external area is identified with reputation of the university, which consists of public relations and corporate social responsibility activities.

Due to its limited volume, this paper focuses exclusively on university image in the eyes of university candidates, even though they are not the only recipients of university image. That group includes also: students of a particular university, its graduates, employees, families of those groups, competing and partner universities, businesses working with the university – who may potentially find employees among the students or whose employees have graduated from the university. Moreover, entities that finance the university's teaching and research activities, associations working with the university, the media, and the local community belong to that group as well. The majority of the above groups may include both Polish and foreign stakeholders. It should be emphasized that the image of a particular university may vary considerably depending on the study group; besides, representatives of various groups may base

[*] SGH Warsaw School of Economics

Figure 1. Multi-dimensional model of university identity, image and reputation



Source: Steiner, L., Sundström, A.C., Sammalisto K. (2013). An analytical model for university identity and reputation strategy work, *Higher Education*, *65*(4), p. 409.

their assessment of the image on different criteria. In studies carried out at universities in the USA, students (the first study group) listed three factors contributing to the image: academic factors, athletic factors (which included a perception of the university as an excellent place to spend your time) and the extent of media coverage. Respondents belonging to the second study group (adults, non-students) also mentioned the opinions of their family and friends, the education level and the extent of individual fanship (Arpan, 2003, p. 110).

Reasons for studying university image

The introduction of the Bologna process and the related harmonization of academic grades across the European Union already contributes, and may contribute even more in the future, to increased mobility and further reinforcement of the competition between academic centers, which may eventually lead to the demise of the weakest facilities (Alves, 2010, p. 73). For example, in 2015, 1.6 million students in Europe chose university studies in a country other than the one where they graduated from high school, with 46% commencing undergraduate studies and 41% enrolling on graduate programs. Almost one third of them chose the United Kingdom (27%), followed by France (15%) and Germany (14%) (Eurostat, 2017). The indicated Eurostat data published in 2017 show that the highest share of foreign students in the total number of students was recorded in Luxembourg (46%), the United Kingdom (18.5%) and Cyprus (17.5%). The said ratio was the lowest in Slovenia (2.7%), Poland (2.6%) and Croatia (0.5%).

One way for a university to increase its competitive edge on the market of higher-education schools is to build its lasting and appealing image in the eyes of candidates – to distinguish itself from other universities and make the candidates want to get in. However, it is also important not to misrepresent the actual qualities of the university since candidates who later become students will verify the marketing slogans that attracted them in the first place.

Those who stress the importance of building an appealing image of a university often mention how difficult it is to promote an education service – due to its intangible and specific nature. This intangibility causes a number of difficulties, for instance, when it comes to presenting the offer and defining the candidates' expectations, and it increases the decision-related risks, while the specificity lies in the fact that the service is used (for some people) only once in a lifetime. Higher education choices are accompanied by mental pressure, the service is provided over a long period and the final evaluation of the decision is highly deferred (Krzyżak, 2009, p. 124). Actually, similar aspects pertain not only to universities but also to schools at a lower level of education (Pietrulewicz, 2014, p. 23).

Impact of university image on student satisfaction and loyalty

The effects of university image go beyond attracting candidates. Studies on the correlation between university image and satisfaction of the students of a particular higher-education institution were carried out, among others, in Spain (the group of respondents consisted of 6675 students from Spanish universities). The study measured the cognitive image, the affective image, the overall image and the university satisfaction. The cognitive image involved

21 elements, including reputation, prestige, challenging access, quality of teaching, requirements, faculty, to name a few. The affective image focused on four feelings related to pleasure, boredom/stimulation, stress/relaxation and gloom/joy. The overall image could be rated as either positive or negative. Satisfaction was measured through comparison with the prior expectations towards the university and comparison with a perfect university and taking into account the current university satisfaction level (Beerli Palacio, 2002, pp. 493-494). The cited article demonstrates that the cognitive aspect influences the affective aspect and together they form the overall image, with the affective aspect having a grater contributing power. According to the above studies, the overall image has an impact on student satisfaction, with the affective aspect also being more prominent here (Beerli Palacio, 2002, p. 500).

Studies carried out in Portugal show that university image determines not only student satisfaction but also loyalty (the study group consisted of 2687 Portuguese respondents from public universities). The studies analyzed the direct and indirect impact of image, yielding the results presented in Table 1.

Image has a greater direct impact on satisfaction (0.45) than on student loyalty (0.23), and if we also add indirect impact, we obtain high levels of both variables (0.86 and 0.72, respectively), which suggests that university image can largely contribute to the satisfaction derived by students and shape their loyalty to their academic center (Alves, 2010, p. 82).

In employer branding, the best employers, ones that are the most desired by candidates, are referred to in the literature as 'employers of choice.' The term denotes an employer who has a strong and recognized brand, whom employees can trust, of whom they can be proud, and working for whom is a unique experience (Wojtaszczyk, 2009, p. 20). Such an employer provides an excellent workplace, for example by skillfully responding to the changing needs and interests of employees and the organization (Baker, 2014, pp. 1–2). Such an employer is very demanding, challenges its employees to make full use of their potential and builds strong employee relations (Leary-Joyce, 2007, p. 25). To sum up the above deliberations on university image, the author proposes a definition of a 'university of choice,' where the term means a university that has a strong, recognized brand, offers an excellent, satisfying place of learning, responds to the ever changing needs and interests of students, makes students proud, wins their loyalty and is listed by candidates as their first choice.

Objective and methodology of studies – image of the SGH Warsaw School of Economics

The above analyses suggest that successful competition on the market of higher-education schools requires first examining the image and then determining how and on what grounds it is construed by the recipients to ultimately learn how to shape it and what tools to use to communicate it to the recipients.

The first of the above stages, i.e. examining the image of the university, was the object of the studies carried out by the Management Education Research Team of the SGH Management Institute under the supervision of SGH professor Sławomir Winch, PhD, from March to July 2018.

The study group consisted of potential candidates for a Polish university of economics – SGH Warsaw School of Economics (SGH). The objective of the study was to analyze the image of the SGH in the eyes of candidates interested in pursuing their education there. The authors of the study wanted to learn in particular the candidates' opinions about the SGH and what guided them in their decisions to choose that particular school. The hypothesis, referred to as H0, was that the most important factors shaping the image of the SGH is high employability and high earnings when compared to the graduates of other universities. Poland has five public universities of economics: in Katowice, Kraków, Poznań, Wrocław and SGH Warsaw School of Economics in Warsaw. In addition, the education market offers plenty of private schools of economics as well as universities that offer economics or management programs which compete for the same candidates. The SGH is a university with over one hundred years of tradition. Its graduates include many famous economists who later held important positions in government and European administration, people of business and culture. The SGH has been leading in Polish university rankings for many years.

A questionnaire with four groups of questions was created specifically for the study. Those groups were related to university image, the sources of information about the university, the reasons for choosing SGH and the candidates' system of values. The questionnaire was distributed between April and June 2018 to those who met the criteria of the target group, i.e. secondary school students interested in enrolling on the SGH. The respondents included in particular participants of the SGH preparatory courses, attendees at the SGH Open Day, and high school students from the SGH

Table 1. Impact of image on student satisfaction and loyalty

	Direct impact	Indirect impact	Overall impact
Satisfaction	0.45	0.40	0.86
Loyalty	0.23	0.50	0.73

Source: H. Alves, M. Raposo, *The influence of university image on student behaviour*, International Journal of Educational Management, 24(1), 2010, 81.

Academic Class Programme.[1] A total of 433 properly filled out surveys were obtained. Since sample selection was targeted and the group is not representative, the results cannot be applied to the whole community. Still, since the study group was relatively large, preliminary conclusions regarding the trends among university candidates can be identified.

49% of the study group were women and 47% were men (4% gave no details in this respect). The majority of the respondents were born in 1999 (47%), 18% were born in 2000, and 13% in 2001 (17% did not answer the question). The questionnaires were filled out by high school students from big cities (a population of over 1 million – 25%; from 500,000 to 1 million – 16%) as well as medium-sized cities and small towns (from 100,000 to 500,000 – 24%; from 10,000 to 50,000 – 25%; below 10,000 – 3%). Only 2.5% of the respondents lived in villages.

Image of the SGH emerging from the study results

In the initial part of the study, the respondents were asked to finish the sentence 'The SGH Warsaw School of Economics is...' any way they wanted to, which was to check their general associations with the analyzed school.

A great majority gave an answer suggesting that they saw the SGH as Poland's top university of economics. The second most common answer involved development possibilities – the SGH was perceived as a school offering considerable opportunities, especially in terms of finding a good job. Examples of the respondents' statements: *the best university of economics in Poland, where students have good career prospect*s (survey 86); *a school that can produce good, entrepreneurial people* (survey 104); *a university of economics whose graduates find employment, which cannot be said about 90% of such universities in Poland* (survey 111). Many statements addressed the prestige of the university, e.g., *the university has good opinions in the country and is recognized by employers* (survey 90); *a prestigious university that offers good prospects for the future* (survey 101).

The study also checked to what extent the respondents agreed with opinions about the SGH suggested by the authors of the survey. In their responses, the survey participants used a five-level Likert scale, rating their opinions from 'Strongly disagree' (1) to 'Strongly agree' (5). The suggested opinions with the percentage distribution of 'Agree' and 'Strongly agree' responses are presented in Table 2 in decreasing order.

Three statements with which the respondents agree the most are: 'The SGH is the best university of economics in Poland' (83.6% – aggregate 'Agree' and 'Strongly agree' answers, taking into account the 'I don't know' answers), 'You can meet a lot of interesting people at the SGH' (79.4%) and 'SGH graduates positively stand out against other job candidates' (76%). So, the leading position of the SGH against other universities of economics and in relation to the

Table 2. Opinions about the SGH in the eyes of university candidates

	'Agree' and 'Strongly agree'	Arithmetic mean
The SGH is the best university of economics in Poland (W3)	83.6%	4.56
You can meet a lot of interesting people at the SGH (W2)	79.4%	4.33
SGH graduates positively stand out against other job candidates (W11)	76.0%	4.41
The university is a place where you can pursue your interests (W1)	72.3%	4.28
The SGH develops practical skills (W9)	72.1%	4.26
The SGH guarantees that you will learn foreign languages (W15)	71.3%	4.35
The SGH is an innovative school (W10)	61.7%	4.14
The SGH hires prominent business practitioners (W6)	57.9%	4.38
The school makes it possible to balance work and study (W13)	57.5%	4.18
The SGH is one of Europe's leading universities (W4)	49.8%	3.86
The SGH hires prominent scientists (W5)	45.5%	4.30
It is hard to get in the SGH, but it is easy to get through (W14)	41.3%	3.96
The SGH sets new trends in economics (W8)	37.4%	4.14
The SGH sets new trends in business (W7)	36.5%	4.15
The university is associated with the rat race (a materialistic approach to life) (W12)	20.8%	3.36

Source: author's own work.

[1] The SGH Academic Classes are selected classes in several dozen high schools in Poland that work with the SGH to introduce high school students to the academic world through joint classes with the participation of the university faculty (both at school and at SGH), implementation of various projects and organization of university tours.

labor market was mentioned again. A new appreciated variable is that the SGH offers opportunities to meet interesting people who may be highly valuable to the candidates in terms of their future career or friendship.

Respondents were also asked to specify which of the above opinions (W1-W15) was the most important to them. The most popular answer was W11, about standing out in the labor market (17.6%), followed by W3 – describing the SGH as the best university of economics in Poland (15.9% of responses).

The researchers also checked what were the contributing factors for choosing the SGH. The proposed factors along with the percentage distribution of 'Agree' and 'Strongly agree' answers are presented in Table 3 in decreasing order.

The following three factors were the most often confirmed by the respondents: 'High earnings after graduation' (94% – aggregate 'Agree' and 'Strongly agree' answers, taking into account the 'I don't know' answers), 'High earnings after graduation (91.2%) and 'High prestige of the SGH' (85%). For this question, the respondents were also asked to specify the one factor they found to be the most important. As many as 31.9% mentioned 'High earnings after graduation'. 'Employability' came second, with 29.1%. The presented percentage distributions confirmed the H0 hypothesis. However, other variables also may have contributed significantly and only a factor analysis could reveal the power of their impact on the dependent variable, i.e., the image of the SGH. A factor analysis assumes that there is a correlation between the dependent (actual) variable and independent variables – factors (Marcinkowska, Mider, 2013, pp. 339-359). The factor analysis involved the 15 variables discussed above: W1-W15.

Tests were conducted to verify the properties of the variables for the factor analysis: KMO measure (0.884), Bartlett's sphericity test (χ^2 (105) = 2293.402, $p<0.001$), determinant of the correlation matrix (0.005). Ten variables ultimately qualified for the factor model and they served as the basis for identifying five independent factors. Their structure explains about 78% of the total variance of the original set of variables. For the first of the factors, two variables – 'Setting new trends in business' and 'Setting new trends in economics' – explained 18% of variance from the SGH image. For the second one, factor analysis identified two other variables: 'Hiring prominent scientists' and 'Hiring prominent practitioners' (17% of the variance to be explained). The third factor is 'Pursing your interests' (16%). The fourth factor emphasizes the 'Practical dimension of the skills' (15%), and the fifth one – 'Balance of work and study' (12%). So, the original hypothesis should be supplemented with the following additional statement: 'Standing out in the labor market' and 'High earnings after graduation' are the most important reasons for enrolling on the SGH but candidates are searching for ways to achieve such goals. They see them in the opportunities offered by a university that sets new trends in business and economics, which were identified as variables in the factor analysis. Therefore, they combine the instrumental value of the education offered by the SGH (well-paid job) with knowledge-related values (learning about new trends in economics and in business).

The results differ from the studies quoted in the article, which list university reputation and tradition as the main factors determining the perception and choice of a university by the candidates (Oczachowska, 2006), although they do refer to the significance of the university's position against its competition and to the teaching level (Ryńca & Miśko, 2016). Curiously enough, the results are much closer to those obtained in a study involving 3652 students from the Wrocław University of Science and Technology, for whom the group of factors including 'future prospects' was of primary importance. The group included expectations related to future employment and to the attainable earnings (Gąsiorowska, 2004).

Conclusions

In the increasingly competitive European market of higher-education schools, the role of building and sustaining an appropriate image in the eyes of a wide range of stakeholder groups is gaining importance. The study helps explore the main factors determining how universities are perceived by university candidates. Study results show how important it is for the educational offer to be tied to the labor market and the future career of the candidates, and the factor analysis also adds the element of setting new trends in economics and business. The analyzed foreign studies signal that effective activities in the area of image-building may help a university not only attract the top candidates but also maintain a high level of satisfaction and loyalty among its students. Drawing from employer branding and from the 'employer of choice notion,' the author developed an original definition of a 'university of choice.'

Research regarding university image should be continued, for instance due to its practical implications. The future analyses in this area may focus on: differences between the image construed by students before enrolling and after graduation; comparisons between the image in the eyes of candidates for various specialties (e.g., universities of technology, economics, other); comparisons between the image from the perspective of various groups of stakeholders connected with the university; researching image-building tools and their effectiveness.

References

Alves, H., Raposo, M. (2010). The influence of university image on student behaviour, *International Journal of Educational Management*, *24*(1), 73–85. DOI: 10.1108/09513541011013060

Arpan, L.M., Raney, A.A., Zivnuska, S. (2003). A cognitive approach to understanding university image, *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, *8*(2), 97–113. DOI: 10.1108/1356328031047535

Baker, T. (2014), *Attracting and Retaining Talent: Becoming an Employer of Choice*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Beerli Palacio, A., Díaz Meneses, G., Pérez Pérez, P.J., (2002). The configuration of the university image and its relationship with the satisfaction of students, *Journal of Educational Administration*, *40*(5), 486–505. DOI: 10.1108/09578230210440311

Białoń, L. (2012). Budowanie wizerunku szkoły wyższej jako mega narzędzia marketingu, *Prace Instytutu Lotnictwa, 4*(25), 367–385.

Eurostat (2017), Learning mobility statistics, Retrieved from http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Learning_mobility_statistics

Gąsiorowska, A. (2004). Dlaczego wybierają Politechnikę? Analiza procesu decyzyjnego kandydatów na studia na Politechnice Wrocławskiej, *Pryzmat, 183*, 6–7.

Krzyżak, M. (2009). Istota i potrzeba budowania wizerunku uczelni, *Zeszyty Naukowe WSOWL, 2*(152), 119–126.

Leary-Joyce, J. (2007). *Budowanie wizerunku pracodawcy z wyboru*, Kraków: Wolters Kluwer Polska.

Oczachowska, A. (2006). *Przyczyny wyboru uczelni ekonomicznej przez kandydatów na studia*, In G. Nowaczyk, P. Lisiecki (Eds.) *Marketingowe zarządzanie szkołą wyższą,* (pp. 165–173). Poznań: Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Bankowej w Poznaniu.

Pietrulewicz, T. (2014). Wpływ wizerunku szkoły na jej wybór przez rodziców w świetle przeprowadzonych badań, *e-mentor*, *3*(55), 22–30, DOI: 10.15219/em55.1105

Ryńca, R., Miśko, R. (2016). Ocena wizerunku uczelni z uwzględnieniem instrumentów public relations na przykładzie szkół wyższych, *Finanse, Rynki Finansowe, Ubezpieczenia, 4(*82*)*/1, 223–237. DOI: 10.18276/frfu.2016.4.82/1-19

Steiner, L., Sundström, A.C., Sammalisto K. (2013). An analytical model for university identity and reputation strategy work, *Higher Education*, *65*(4), 401–415.

Stachura, E. (2006). Elementy wizerunku szkoły wyższej. In G. Nowaczyk, P. Lisiecki (Eds.), *Marketingowe zarządzanie szkołą wyższą*, (pp. 359–369). Poznań: Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Bankowej w Poznaniu.

Wojtaszczyk, K. (2009). Od marki do marki pracodawcy z wyboru, *e-mentor, 1*(28), 18–22.

Abstract

The article aims at broadening the knowledge in the area of the image of a university. It provides an overview of research on factors influencing the perception of a university and its impact on the satisfaction and loyalty of students. The author also proposes a definition of the 'university of choice.' The paper is based on the results of research carried out on a sample of over 400 respondents – candidates for studies at a Polish state economic university: SGH Warsaw School of Economics. One of the aims of that research was to examine their perception of the image of the university. The results obtained indicate the importance of links between the educational offer, the labor market and future careers of candidates, while the conducted factor analysis provides some additional information concerning new trends in economics and business.

Keywords: image; reputation; prestige; candidate for studies; university of economics

Joanna Tabor-Błażewicz is a doctor of economic sciences, assistant professor at the Department of Management Education Research at the Management Institute of SGH Warsaw School of Economics. Her scientific interests focus on human resources management, in particular talent management, human capital management, managerial education, professional development of employees, as well as communication and team relations issues.

We recommend

TNC19 – Forging digital societies, June 19–20, 2019, Tallin, Estonia

TNC is the largest and most prestigious European research and education networking conference. **TNC19**, the conference's 35th edition, will be hosted by **EENet of HITSA**, the Estonian Education and Research Network, and will be held in Tallinn, Estonia's capital city.
This year's conference theme, Forging Digital Societies, is inspired by two main concepts: the idea that computer networks, by supporting human interactions, help to create and forge digital societies is combined with the innovative model of Estonia's e-residency programme.
Ranging from security strategies, national ICT policies and the role of community, the **TNC19** programme covers a wide variety of inspiring topics by renowned experts in their fields. In addition, a variety of community meetings and interactive workshops will surround the conference's 21 sessions throughout the week.

More information: **https://tnc19.geant.org**