

## **EXPECTATIONS OF GENERATION Z - A CHALLENGE FOR ACADEMIC DIDACTIC STAFF**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The social, cultural, and technological aspects of the environment significantly affect the generation Z student's behaviour. Expectations regarding teachers' work are rising and students' commitment to learning is declining. The aim of the article is to present challenges posed before the didactic process, based on the research results regarding the role and significance of the didactic staff in the opinion of generation Z. The presented issues constitute an introduction to a discussion regarding the current approach to the educational process, in the light of technological and social challenges. The methods selected for the purposes of this study are an analysis based on a profound source literature query, which was combined with empirical research performed among students at the Opole University of Technology, using the computer-assisted web interviewing method, by means of a proprietary survey questionnaire. Research results constitute an essential source of knowledge regarding factors that, in the opinion of generation Z students, have the most significance for the efficiency of the educational process, and for the construction of interpersonal relations between students and lecturers. On the basis of the achieved results, recommendations for the didactic staff were developed, regarding the creation of new, engaging didactic forms, and assuming the role of a mentor both for the career, as well as life path. The key value achieved in a result of the research is primary data, constituting the basis for developing a recommendation regarding challenges posed before the academic didactic staff.

***Keywords:** educational process, generation Z, academic didactic staff, interpersonal relations*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Changes that have taken place within the employment market, during the last decades, suggest that better-educated persons possess (and will remain to possess) an advantage, as the employment market is becoming more and more a knowledge-based economy. In a result, ensuring access to high-quality higher education to the large portion of the population, capable of adapting to the swiftly changing workforce, is among the primary challenges which the institutions of higher education and educational systems, in general, must face [10].

The purpose of the research was to identify the expectations of the generation Z to-wards the academic didactic staff and the teaching process. The aim of the

article is to present the research results regarding the role and significance of the didactic staff in the opinion of generation Z, within the context of modern challenges posed before the universities.

In the classical approach, the university defined itself in a manner independent from the external environment. Based on strict standards of education, the university formed faculties and educational programs. Similarly, the direction and the scope of scientific research were formed. Another step was to introduce them to the market, i.e. complete enrolment and research results' sales. However, this approach is already a thing of the past. The modern university is fully directed at the social and economic environment, monitoring the changes occurring in the environment, and gathering information necessary for swift and flexible adaptation to the ever-changing market requirements, particularly, within the context of employment market expectations. The aforementioned become even more of a challenge, as the declared demand for a particular set: knowledge, skill, competency; comes from the students on the one side, and from the employees on the other.

Students, as the university's customers for educational services require a feeling of trust, that the process of education is in compliance with the qualitative requirements of the key stakeholders of the university, and will ensure their professional success, and the expected quality of life.

Employers, as the university's customers for a 'product' of educational services, pose a challenge of creating and perfecting the intellectual potential of future staff regarding employment market expectations.

In a very broad perspective, the key elements of the mission of higher education were reduced to four aspects [13]:

1. Creating human capital intellectual potential (student education area).
2. Creating new knowledge (the area of scientific research and the intensification of cooperation with the economic sector).
3. Promoting knowledge among its potential users (processes of socialisation of knowledge in result of research results commercialisation, and collaboration with external stakeholders).
4. Intergenerational knowledge transfer.

The four presented areas should be considered as strategic for every university which, depending on its own intellectual resources, accomplishes them in a more or less effective way. A university, intending to manage its image efficiently, should engage its own resources in active communication with the market regarding its own identity, in order to: attract attention, attract interest regarding its offer, strengthening involvement, and building loyalty. The market environment forces the organisation to undertake diversified marketing actions

within the aspect of fighting for a competitive position. The specifics of the university's operations within this area indicates that the key element of marketing actions is brand image shaped by the opinion within the environment, particularly, the students.

## **INTERGENERATIONAL KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER**

Evolutionary changes of recent years have significantly changed the environment and the way of how young adults function. The key area of a student includes the academic environment, serving both the higher education and upbringing purposes. The aforementioned occurs due to social and cultural aspects of the environment, that significantly affect the student's behaviour. It is related to the multi-dimensional nature and the specifics of the academic environment, which allows acquiring knowledge and skills, as well as, helps develop personality and attitudes, determining the value system and social behaviour of young people. Intergenerational projects can provide opportunities for younger people to develop qualities such as initiative, flexibility, openness, empathy and creativity and to understand the value of lifelong learning. Greater participation in positive intergenerational activities results in an increased sense of worth, self-esteem and self-confidence, and an enhanced sense of social responsibility. But, according to Rupčić [15], it is important to remember that 'Intergenerational relations have often been identified as sources of difficulty and conflict'.

Resources responsible for the adequate realisation of the educational process, i.e. primarily in compliance with students' expectations, is the didactic staff of the university, which, this way, more or less consciously, plays a major role in the process of brand building. The relation between expectations, and actual value received, shapes the students' satisfaction index, therefore, affecting for their affection towards the brand, which is the university.

Due to the multiplicity of tasks executed, the profession of an academic teacher is highly demanding. An academic teacher is simultaneous: an educator, a scientist, and an organiser. In his didactic work, the teacher transfers knowledge, which is primarily a result of his scientific activity. The teacher establishes an interpersonal relationship with students, in which he encourages them to use a varied surplus of knowledge and skills, aiming at the execution of the process of studying, that is practical application of the mind to the acquisition of valuable knowledge.

The 'interpersonal relations' term is associated with the mutual influence between persons, with social interaction and collaboration, based on respect regarding views and opinions. Additionally, the relation must also include trust. Previous research has shown that interpersonal relationships are an important predictor of many student outcomes such as: awareness of possessed skills, self-efficacy and self-confidence [1], [2], [3], [12].

A healthy teacher-student relationship is argued to be the characteristic of a productive academic environment [11], because of the association with student cognitive learning outcomes and motivation [12].

An academic teacher is a person which is adequately prepared for both didactic and scientific work, meaning, that he should possess a high scholarly culture and well-grounded knowledge, which he presents skilfully and in an interesting way to the students, simultaneously encouraging them for the independent acquisition of knowledge and further learning. Contemporary universities require the academic teachers to possess highly developed competencies: communicational, organisational, creative, logic, informational, as well as, media and marketing-oriented ones [7]. His didactic work should be characterised by dedication combined with passion, and an open mind, as these features aid the establishment of inter-personal relations, where the teacher is taking the role of a mentor of an indisputable authority among students, as well as, the social environment of the university [4], [8], [14].

In order to tackle the challenges which the academic teachers face currently, they must redefine themselves within the areas of:

- the complexity of the role of an academic teacher, resulting from varied roles assumed by them at the university,
- personal brand and self-awareness,
- possessed skills within the scope of conducting classes with students in accordance with their expectations,
- competencies allowing to be an aware academic teacher, within the context of the opportunities and limitations in shaping the development path.

Currently, the academic teacher is primarily expected to introduce innovative forms of education with an emphasis of encouraging creativity of an individual who will be well-prepared merit and practice-wise. Simultaneously, he must display a positive attitude towards novelties and changes, as well as, accept unconventional methods of work. An academic teacher will be able to develop the mature personality of students, if he, himself will display an exceptional personality, and possess the skill of introducing new development perspectives to the students. Therefore, he must possess high qualifications: spiritual, moral, and intellectual, as he is to be a model for the other.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The aim of the performed study was to learn the opinion of Students regarding the role and the significance of the human factor within the context of expectations regarding the didactic process. Computer Assisted Web Interview research was conducted among first and second-cycle students of all faculties of the Opole University of Technology. The author's survey, developed using the online form,

was placed on the university's websites and on the social media profiles of the university, student government and the profiles of individual faculties. The sampling was random. The number of students of Opole University of Technology at the time of the study was 6,412. With such a population indicated, the research sample should be 362 people, with a maximum error of 5%. In the course of collecting primary data, 725 respondents showed their activity, resulting in a maximum error of 3%. The designed survey questionnaire included 8 research inquiries, i.a. including:

1. What is important in the evaluation of a lecturer?
2. Which aspects, related to the didactic staff, are essential within the course of cooperation?
3. Are the actions undertaken by the didactic staff an element of building dedication of the Students to the life of the academic environment?

Based on the formed opinions, within the scope of a mind map of the issues and research questions, the following directional research hypotheses were presented, based on the professional and life experience:

H1. Interpersonal relations are a key factor for building the image of the university.

H2. Students expect not only the transfer of knowledge, but also, varied forms of cooperation.

H3. Didactic staff of the university should improve the ability of career support and counselling.

Research using the Computer Assisted Web Interview method was performed among the first and second grade students of all faculties of the Opole University of Technology. The survey sample was random. The general population amounted to 6412 individuals, whereas the required research sample: 362 individuals. During gathering of primary data, 725 respondents displayed activity, and so the maximum margin of error amounted to 3%.

## RESULTS

*What issues do the Students consider as significant in academic teacher evaluation?*

In order to receive more detailed information regarding the areas, which the Students consider as essential in academic teacher evaluation, 14 potential areas were identified, with the possibility of determining the scope of their significance (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Significance of selected areas in the assessment of academic teacher.

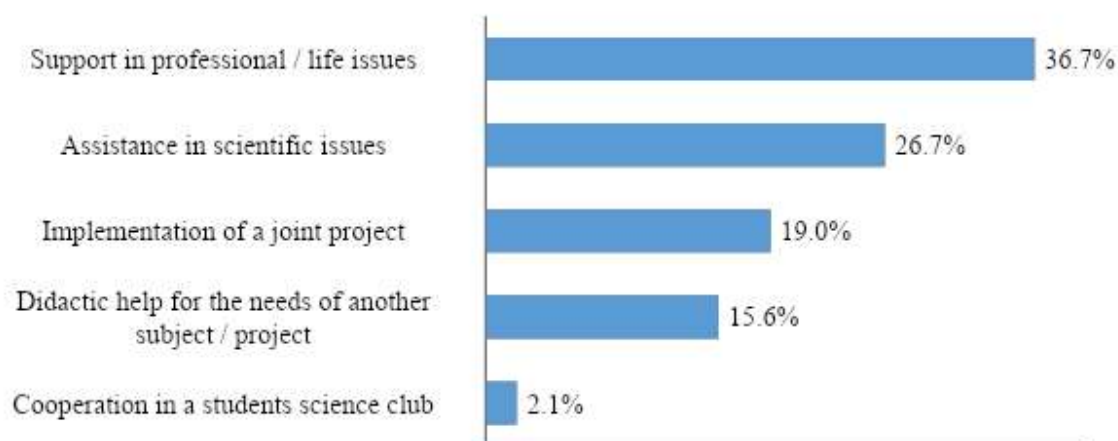
	not important	slightly important	moderately important	important	very important
The way in which he carries on classes	0.1%	0.7%	3.5%	15.6%	80.1%
Openness and affordability for students	0.1%	1.4%	6.1%	22.4%	70.4%
Ability to explain complexities	0.3%	0.8%	7.5%	24.9%	67.2%
Ease of establishing contact with students	0.3%	2.2%	13.1%	32.8%	52.3%
Dependability and transparency of evaluation criteria	0.3%	2.9%	15.6%	30.2%	51.3%
Illustrating topics of classes with examples	0.7%	3.3%	13.2%	35.6%	47.4%
Ability to appreciate students	0.7%	4.0%	16.8%	36.2%	42.1%
High verbal culture	1.4%	3.9%	21.4%	38.9%	34.6%
Professional experience	6.1%	8.6%	23.9%	31.6%	30.5%
Ability to discipline the group	1.9%	6.8%	25.2%	38.2%	28.4%
Punctuality and conscientiousness	2.5%	10.7%	23.2%	35.7%	28.4%
Clothing and general aesthetics	12.5%	18.9%	33.0%	26.7%	9.3%
Academic achievements	18.2%	19.2%	32.0%	22.0%	9.3%
Degrees and academic titles	22.4%	20.6%	30.0%	19.6%	7.9%

*Source: Own source*

Primarily, the respondents indicated the character of the teacher-student interpersonal relations character, pointing at the significance of social competencies, and personal predispositions of the lecturers, that primarily result from their innate features. Therefore, the challenge posed before the academic teachers is the development and perfection of the aforementioned features through training within the scope of: impression management, innovative educational methods, participation education model, e-technology use within the didactic process, conflict resolving, team communication, etc. The essential role is played by the university itself, as, apart from investing 'in science', it should also support this area of the didactic process, which is the care for the development of the intellectual potential and personal competencies of the academic teacher. The answers given, confirm hypothesis H1.

*What aspects related to the didactic staff are considered by the Students to be essential in regard to cooperation?*

Respondents were asked to indicate the most essential, in their opinion, experiences regarding cooperation undertaken by students with the scientific and didactic staff of the university (Figure 1.)



**Fig. 1.** *Significance of experience from cooperation undertaken by students with academic teachers.*

*Source: Own source*

The respondents' answers confirm hypothesis H2. The traditional forms of education, focus on 'transferring knowledge', whereas the modern forms of education encourage creativity and self-development. Students are more eager to acknowledge forms of cooperation that provide them with an opportunity for interaction and learning through 'experience'.

For testing the Chi-square test of independence was implemented. The Chi-squared test of independence is one of the most basic and common hypothesis tests in the statistical analysis and should be followed with a strength statistic. The Cramer's V is the most common strength test used to test the data when a significant Chi-square result has been obtained [9]. Cramers'V statistic ranges from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating larger strengths of associations.

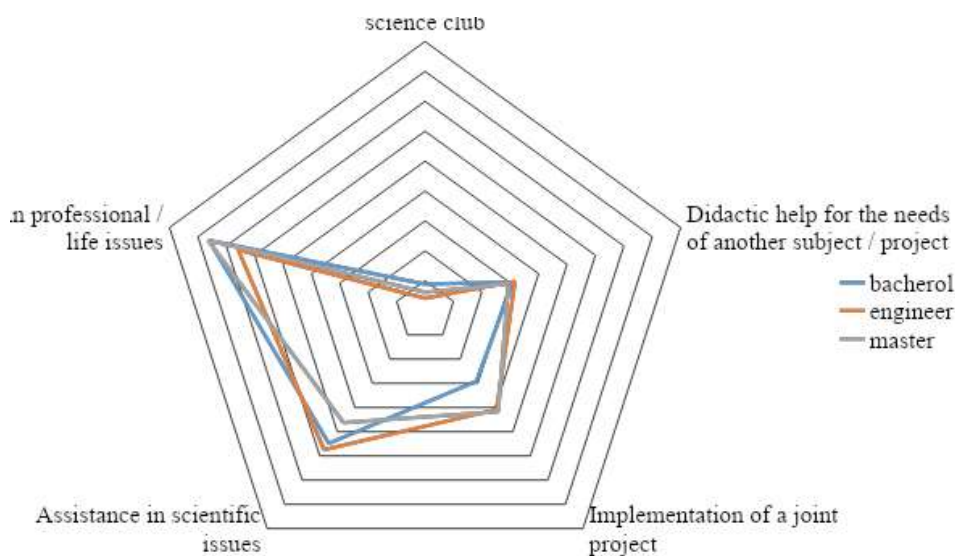
The hypothesis for the Chi-square test of independence for the significance of experience from cooperation undertaken by students with academic teachers and the level of education:

H0: Significance of experience from cooperation undertaken by students with academic teachers does not depend on the and the level of education - variables are independent.

H1: Significance of experience from cooperation undertaken by students with academic teachers

does not depend on the and the level of education - variables aren't independent.

The empirical value of the Chi-Square test statistic is 9.86, less than the critical value of 18.31, so there are no grounds for rejecting H0. The significance level for a chosen hypothesis test is  $\alpha=0.05$ , the P-value is 0.453 and Cramers'V value (0.171) indicates a weak relationship between variables, not enough evidence is available to suggest the null is false at the 95% confidence level. The significance of experience from cooperation undertaken by students with academic teachers does not depend on the and the level of education (Figure 2).



**Fig. 2.** Significance of experience from cooperation with academic teachers by level of education.

Source: Own source

Additionally, answers given by the respondents confirm hypothesis H3. A university if the last point on the educational path and the awareness of beginning a professional life, after achieving a university diploma, encourages students to contemplate their choices and the possibilities provided by these choices. Lecturers should not only assume the role of a teacher of a particular subject but of a mentor who supports the process of shaping the career path and further education.

*What actions, undertaken by the didactic staff, are an element of building involvement of the Students in the life of the academic environment?*

It is obvious, that the primary feature identified by the students is, didactic classes, and it is their quality that essentially affects the evaluation and opinion



from the students, as well as, the achieved level of involvement in the commissioned tasks. In the research conducted, it was key to identify activities of academic teachers different from didactics, that would, in the students' opinions be essential and actually impact the shaped relations. Table 2 presents 7 proposals of activities, directly related to the university or not related to the university, while recognised by the students.

**Table 2.** *Significance of the activities undertaken by the teaching staff in the assessment of students.*

	not important	slightly important	moderately important	important	very important
Cooperation with students	0.3%	1.3%	8.6%	27.9%	62.5%
Conducting research projects	2.8%	7.5%	21.4%	36.8%	31.2%
Professional career (outside the university)	4.3%	9.1%	26.7%	32.6%	27.6%
Social activity	2.4%	7.8%	25.9%	36.6%	27.0%
Science publications	4.6%	12.8%	29.7%	33.8%	19.1%
Interviews / columns in the media	6.3%	11.3%	31.6%	33.0%	17.5%
Hobbies (not related to the profession)	12.1%	15.5%	30.1%	24.7%	17.4%

*Source: Own source*

Cooperation with students is the indubitable leader, which was indicated as very important by 62.5% of the respondents, and with the important grade, it was collectively chosen by more than 90% of students; and so the result is a clear confirmation of the H2 hypothesis that 'students expect not solely passing knowledge, but primarily, varied forms of cooperation. The second activity recognised as very important (36.8%) is conducting a research project, and, along with the important status, it was collectively chosen by 68% of respondents. Additionally, students assess their professional (non-academic) career high, as it was as very important by 27.6%, however, in the joint evaluation (very important and important), social activity is taking the lead, chosen by 63.6%, amounting to a little more than 3% of the respondents.

In correlation to the issue, Which aspects related to the didactic staff are considered as essential in cooperation? a clear trend is emerging, regarding the students' expectations. It is a signal to take action in order to modify the shape and character of cooperation between academic teachers and students.

## **DISCUSSION**

The aim of the study was to identify the most essential factors impacting the relation between an academic teacher and a student. During the preparation of the study, 3 re-search hypotheses were proposed:

H1. Interpersonal relations are a key factor for building the image of the university.

H2. Students expect not only the transfer of knowledge, but also, varied forms of cooperation.

H3. Didactic staff of the university should improve the ability of career support and counselling.

All hypotheses were confirmed in the study, as demonstrated by the statistics and the result analysis, regarding issues such as:

What issues are considered by Students as significant in the assessment of academic teachers?

What aspects related to the didactic staff are considered by Students as essential in cooperation?

What activities undertaken by the didactic staff are an element of building engagement of the Students in the life of the academic environment?

The analysis of results allowed to propose recommendations within the area of challenges posed before the didactic staff of the university. The key recommendation, created based on presented issues, is the necessity of focusing attention and efforts on offering students, modern and engaging didactic forms. It is exactly during the personal meetings with a lecturer, when the interpersonal relations are being built, therefore, not only the current content but primarily the form of presentation and encouragement of students, are one of the largest challenges posed before the didactic staff. Conducting case studies should be a standard, with the consideration of the environment, as it allows to refer to the market reality, and enable to overcome the barrier of going from theory to practice. Generation Z (born after 1995), displays particular requirements in this matter, as a result of the conditions in which they were raised. Virtual space, social media, artificial intelligence, modern technologies - it is the daily life of generation Z. Some research has shown [6], that generation Z has an enormous appetite for new technology in all aspects of life. Traditional lectures and discussions (auditory learning) are very strongly disliked by this age group. They prefer interactive games, collaborative projects, advance organizers, challenges, and anything that they can try and see are appreciated.

Generation Z is, in essence, a challenge for the didactic staff, as, through the use of modern technology, they are used to doing numerous things at once. One may say, that they 'work on multiple monitors'. They watch a film on a computer, they do their homework on a tablet, while having a conversation with multiple persons at once via a smartphone. Simultaneously, the students display little focus and quickly lose interest, they are better at learning information in form of infographics, rather than textual content; they require constant stimuli and tasks or they quickly lose interest in the subject, as well as, focus.

Students appreciate teachers, who have non-academic professional experience and competencies coming from practice. In the process of acquiring new intellectual potential, universities should consider professional experience as one of the key conditions for employment, which, in the case of many Polish universities, is not a standard yet. Additionally, it is essential to facilitate a proper environment for the professional development of the didactic staff. The matter at hand is to allow them to simultaneously work professionally and as academic teachers at the university. Universities must create work positions consciously, that will allow acquiring valuable staff, identified by the students as practitioners from the market.

Another major challenge will be the departure of the 'preacher' role in teaching, for the sake of being a mentor of a career and life path. Contemporary conditions of the educational market, have transferred it dramatically to the virtual sphere, where it officially functions in the form of: e-learning courses, webinars, video workshops, dictionaries, dedicated information websites, etc. Simultaneously, an alternative, unofficial educational market has developed, as everyone can post content on the web, using logs, blogs, websites, and social media portals. A teacher is no longer the sole source of information and knowledge. Generation Z, and it is the generation to which current students belong, is using information available online without criticism, and it used to indirect contact with the use of technology and social media [5]. A recommendation for the didactic staff is to open to the modern means of communication and, due to the described features of the students that represent generation Z - redefining the approach of the academic teachers to the student. The educational process demands personalisation and a wider overview of the student as a person, his opinions, expectations, perceptions and fears associated with life-oriented matters.

Authors should discuss the results and how they can be interpreted from the perspective of previous studies and of the working hypotheses. The findings and their implications should be discussed in the broadest context possible. Future research directions may also be highlighted.

## CONCLUSIONS

The contemporary civilisation changes have a significant impact on the educational process in its different stages. The final stage - higher education - proves difficult, as we are dealing with a so-called 'young adult', who often refutes authority and questions the general opinion, while at the same time, contemplating on various life decisions and requiring support, that he finds difficult to ask for. In order to be efficient, the educational process must be based on the behaviourist approach, considering the observed phenomena of mass access to higher education and the organisation of the educational process, which does not support recognising the student's capabilities, or awakening his intellectual potential, as well as, building appropriate interpersonal relations. The results of the performed studies are a demonstration, that young person seek mentors on their career path, and in a world dehumanised by technology, they begin to appreciate direct relations and the ability to learn to benefit from the experiences and skills of the other person.

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