## СЕКЦІЯ 3. ВИЩА ОСВІТА

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## SECTION 3. HIGHER EDUCATION

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# TRANSPARENCY AS THE BASIS OF TRUST IN
# UNIVERSITY–STAKEHOLDER COMMUNICATION

In the 21st century, higher education is experiencing a crisis of trust. According to a survey conducted by Gallup and the Lumina Foundation, only 32% of Americans express a "high level of trust" in universities, whereas in 2015 this figure was 57% [3]. According to Deloitte, a similar trend can also be observed in Europe: "Trust in higher education continues to decline, as evidenced by the latest Gallup data. Concerns about the value of a degree, politicization, rising tuition costs, and perceived misalignment with workforce needs continue to contribute to the erosion of public confidence in US higher education." [1, p. 2].

At the same time, universities traditionally communicate with their target audiences primarily through promotional materials and general indicators of prestige. Students and parents often encounter a lack of specific data on program outcomes – such as employment rates, average graduate incomes, and completion rates. As Kelchen emphasizes: "As the price tag of higher education continues to rise, colleges and universities across the country are under increasing pressure to demonstrate their value." [2]. In other words, the lack of transparent program outcomes directly undermines institutional trust.

Overall, a higher education degree retains its economic and social value, yet this value is not uniform. As Carnevale writes: "the difference in economic returns across majors can amount to hundreds of thousands of dollars over a lifetime" [5, p. 14]. This creates a problem: students and their families often make decisions without access to verified information, relying solely on universities' marketing claims.

As contemporary research shows, the transparency of learning outcomes has become a subject of particular attention. Kelchen & Liu argue: "We provide the first empirical examination of whether the release of program-level outcomes data under GE led for-profit colleges to close low-performing programs or even entire institutions." [4, p. 2]. Similar conclusions are also drawn by the team of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW), led by

Anthony Carnevale: "students have a right to know which programs deliver economic returns and which put them at financial risk" [5, p. 22]. Raj Chetty emphasizes that "some colleges substantially boost upward mobility for low-income students, while others simply reproduce inequality" [6, p. 33].

Chetty et al. also emphasize: "We showed that students from low-income families have excellent long-term outcomes after attending selective schools, but that there are very few low-income students at these schools." [6].

European organizations also emphasize transparency. The ENQA ESG Standards document states: "Institutions should publish information about their activities, including programmes, intended learning outcomes and graduate employment, which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to-date and readily accessible" [7, p. 23]. And in the global report OECD Trends Shaping Education 2025, it is emphasized that: "Transparency and accountability are increasingly viewed as public goods in education" [8, p. 45].

The practice of European Union countries shows that transparency is gradually becoming a standard. In the United Kingdom, the Department for Education annually updates the Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) database, which presents graduate earnings by university and program [9]. The Office for Students has developed open dashboards that allow prospective students to evaluate the cost–benefit ratio of higher education in terms of study expenses and potential earnings [10]. In the Netherlands, the Studiekeuze123 portal is actively developing, where prospective students can compare programs by graduate satisfaction, employment rates, and average earnings. In Scandinavia (for example, in Denmark and Norway), government websites regularly publish statistics on "time-to-job" and the alignment of degrees with labor market needs. These practices confirm that transparency is becoming not only a marketing tool but also a policy instrument in the field of education.

Despite the fact that international standards and research define transparency as a public good and a key element of quality, in university practice it often remains a mere declaration. Information on the outcomes of individual programs is either unavailable or presented in a simplified form that does not allow for an informed choice. This directly leads us to the core of the problem.

The value of higher education is heterogeneous: not all programs ensure a positive return on investment (ROI). A lack of transparency leads to informational asymmetry: universities often promise a "successful future" but do not provide data. As Carnevale & Cheah demonstrate, the estimated lifetime ROI in medicine can reach $220,000 over ten years, whereas in the arts it barely exceeds $10,000 [5, p. 18]. This undermines the trust of students and parents, leads to misguided program choices, and deepens social inequality.

Thus, the main problem lies in the loss of trust in higher education caused by informational asymmetry. Restoring this trust is possible only through systemic measures aimed at enhancing the transparency and accountability of universities.

The first direction is the creation of open dashboards of learning outcomes. Such dashboards should display key indicators: graduate employment rates, average salaries, and the share of students who completed the program. Empirical evidence from the United Kingdom (the LEO dataset) shows that the availability of such data enables prospective students to make informed choices and provides universities with incentives to enhance the quality of their programs. [9].

The second direction is ensuring transparency at the level of specific programs rather than only at the university as a whole. Institutional averages often mask significant disciplinary differences. As Carnevale points out: "students have a right to program-level data" [5, p. 19]. The publication of program-level indicators will reduce the risk of misguided choices and enhance institutional accountability.

The third direction is cooperation with employers in the development of relevant metrics. The labor market is changing rapidly, and the traditional "employed/unemployed" indicators are no longer sufficient. Companies can participate in designing graduate success metrics that reflect skills and suitability for specific professional roles. This also enhances employers' confidence in institutional data.

The fourth direction is the clear interpretation of data for target audiences. As the practice of the Office for Students (OfS) shows, complex tables and methodologies do not work for prospective students. Important tools include infographics, interactive ROI calculators, and visual program comparisons. Transparency must be not only formal but also effective in communication with stakeholders.

The fifth direction is the ethical responsibility of universities in presenting data. There is a risk of manipulating indicators, for example, by reporting only successful graduates. Therefore, it is important to establish standards that require universities to publish complete and verified data. As the OECD points out, transparency is a public good and should serve society rather than merely institutional interests. [8, p. 45].

All these steps share a common goal – the restoration of trust. Transparency is no longer a peripheral concern but has become a fundamental quality criterion. According to Kelchen, as the number and variety of credentials available to students has increased, so too requires greater transparency about the economic value of those credentials [2].

A lack of transparency undermines trust: students make decisions without having complete information, while society questions the effectiveness of educational investments. Transparency should be understood not merely as a communication strategy but as a response to societal demand [5].

Moreover, transparency is an integral component of the quality assurance (QA) system. Universities that make data open and accessible not only strengthen their brand and gain a competitive advantage but also demonstrate social responsibility and compliance with European quality standards (ENQA ESG, OECD). If transparency remains merely declarative, the gap between universities and society will widen, further undermining trust and exacerbating the crisis. Systemic openness should be regarded as a cornerstone for building a new model of partnership between universities, students, employers, and society at large.

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