



**Date:** 7 Sept 2025

**External Examiner's Report**

**Examiner:** Prof DF Meyer, University of Johannesburg, South Africa.

**Candidate:** Mr Solomon Kunle Omogbemi.

**Title of Dissertation:** *Organisational Image and Stakeholder Engagement: Exploring Social Responsibility as a Driver of Competitive Advantage of a University.*

**Institution:** WSB University

**Supervisor:** Assoc. Prof. Katarzyna Szczepańska-Woszczyna, PhD

## **1. General Overview**

The thesis explores the relationship between university social responsibility (USR), organisational image, stakeholder engagement, and competitive advantage. It aims to demonstrate that social responsibility initiatives, when strategically embedded, positively shape institutional image and stakeholder loyalty, thereby enhancing competitiveness in the higher education sector. The study is situated in the Polish higher education context but draws on international frameworks such as stakeholder theory and Carroll's pyramid of CSR. Methodologically, the research uses a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys with case studies of selected universities.

Overall, the thesis addresses a relevant and contemporary issue, given universities' increasing reliance on reputation management, stakeholder relationships, and non-academic value creation to compete globally. The candidate demonstrates significant effort and familiarity with the subject, and the work contributes useful insights to the field.

However, the thesis shows areas that require tightening, particularly regarding methodological transparency, critical engagement with the literature, and analytical depth.

## **2. Assessment of Title and Relevance**

The title captures all major constructs: *organisational image*, *stakeholder engagement*, *social responsibility*, and *competitive advantage*, and it signals both theoretical and practical focus, appealing to academic and practitioner audiences. The title is also timely and relevant, as universities are under increasing scrutiny to act responsibly. However, the title contains many concepts and could be simplified without losing clarity. The “*competitive advantage*” part of the title/topic is ambitious, the study demonstrates correlations but does not fully establish causal mechanisms. Please consider a sharper, more concise and simplified title for example: “*Organisational Image, Stakeholder Engagement, and Social Responsibility: Drivers of Competitive Advantage in Polish Higher Education*”.

## **3. Chapter-by-Chapter Analysis**

### **Introduction**

The introduction frames the research problem around the rising expectations for universities to embrace CSR-like practices, moving beyond teaching and research to societal contributions. It identifies gaps in literature on CSR in higher education and sets objectives and research questions. The introduction provides a clear articulation of objectives and research questions, provide effective use of stakeholder and CSR theories as conceptual anchors, and justifies practical relevance for higher education leaders. However, this section has some overlap with Chapter 1. The justification for focusing on Poland is underdeveloped, Polish higher education has unique historical, cultural, and governance features that could have been leveraged to highlight originality. The research “gap” is presented broadly (few studies on CSR in universities) but lacks fine-grained specification for example the lack of comparative studies in post-transition economies. The section could be improved by adding focus to the research problem and make a stronger case for why Poland provides a distinctive and relevant setting.

### **Chapter 1: Literature Studies on the Image of a University**

This chapter reviews global challenges facing universities (massification, globalisation, digitisation, rankings, mental health crises) and situates organisational image within these

contexts. It also explores the role of stakeholders in shaping image and discusses tools (marketing, branding, financial aid, visual identity). The chapter provided a wide-ranging coverage of global higher education challenges and highlighted the increasing strategic role of the image in university competitiveness. The chapter also emphasises the role of stakeholders as active co-creators of image and recognises and identified multiple instruments for image-building, from marketing to academic excellence. The chapter could be improved as it resembles a survey of higher education issues rather than a focused theoretical synthesis on image. Theoretical treatment of “image” is relatively superficial. Alternative views (e.g., image as narrative construction, symbolic capital, or performative practice) are not considered. The chapter could also be improved by condensing discussions of general challenges and focus more tightly on how these challenges shape university image. Also introduce a conceptual model that integrates the constructs of *image*, *stakeholders*, and *social responsibility*.

## **Chapter 2: The Concept of Social Responsibility**

This chapter traces CSR’s evolution adapts it to universities and positions it as a driver of image and stakeholder engagement. It incorporates the UN SDGs, ethical leadership, and examples of university initiatives. The chapter did well in the covering of CSR evolution from philanthropy to strategy; integration of CSR with higher education is timely, recognising the rise of University Social Responsibility (USR); and good policy alignment with the SDGs enhances practical significance. The chapter could be improved through better contextualisation of CSR in Poland or Eastern Europe. Cultural and governance legacies in the region could provide an original angle. The distinction between CSR as genuine practice and CSR as image management strategy is blurred. The chapter could also be improved by positioning Polish universities within broader comparative literature on CSR adoption in post-transition economies.

## **Chapter 3: Methodological Research Concept**

This chapter outlines a mixed methods design with surveys (targeting students, faculty, community members) and case studies. Hypotheses are explicitly stated. The methodology is well explained related to the mixed-methods design, which is appropriate for a complex, perception-based topic; the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative evidence is valuable, and the hypotheses are aligned with objectives. Where the methodology could be improved is more details and methodological transparency regarding sampling strategy, survey size, distribution channels, and response rates. Case study selection also appears to be ad hoc without justification for representativeness.

## Chapter 4: Results and Analysis

The chapter presents survey findings and case study insights, concluding that CSR enhances university image and stakeholder engagement. The chapter is well presented related to clear organisation and findings presented against hypotheses, integration of survey and case study evidence provides breadth and depth, and findings confirm that CSR adoption contributes to stronger image and engagement. Improvements could be done regarding the level of quantitative analysis. Interpretation sometimes restates data without deeper theoretical interrogation; and causal claims (CSR → Image → Competitive Advantage) are asserted but not rigorously established.

## Chapter 5: Evaluation, Recommendations, and Future Research

Summarises findings, compares with literature, offers recommendations, and suggests future research. The chapter contains clear summary of findings; practical recommendations for administrators; honest acknowledgement of limitations and future research directions (cross-country comparisons, longitudinal studies) are well chosen. Research objectives were also achieved. Improvements are possible by making recommendations less general and more actionable, and limited reflection on transferability beyond Poland.

### 4. Contribution of the Thesis

- **Academic Contribution:** Extends CSR and stakeholder theories into higher education, particularly in Poland.
- **Empirical Contribution:** Provides original survey and case study data.
- **Practical Contribution:** Offers policy recommendations for universities seeking to leverage CSR for reputation and stakeholder engagement.


Improvements are possible by emphasising originality in context-specific findings (Polish HE sector) and highlight lessons transferable to similar settings.

### 5. Final Recommendation

This dissertation addresses an important and timely topic and demonstrates competence in research design and execution. It contributes empirical insights into how CSR initiatives shape university image and stakeholder engagement. However, the work requires limited

refinement regarding methodological transparency, analytical depth, and critical engagement.

**Recommendation:** The thesis should be accepted for the awarding of the PhD **subject to minor revisions**, with revisions as listed above.



Signed Prof DF Meyer

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