

# Building and rebuilding trust in higher education institutions (HEIs). Student's perspective

Trust in HEIs

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The importance of trust in student–university relations is relevant not only for the quality of the educational process and the satisfaction with studying achieved by students, but also for the importance of positive evaluation of HEIs to others. Therefore, the aim of this study is to identify the stages and mechanisms that build trust in student–university relations, the causes of trust violation and trust repair practices.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Public university students from Poland (16) and Germany (12) took part in the study based on semi-structured interviews. The research procedure followed an inductive approach. In addition, the critical events technique was used to identify trust violation and trust repair practices.

**Findings** – The study identifies the stages of the HEIs trust building process and the mechanisms upon which it is built. It attempts to catalogue trust violations, distinguishing three groups of “perpetrators” and categories of their differentiation in terms of their impact on trust. The study indicates ad hoc, informal methods of trust repair applied at HEIs and their conditions.

**Practical implications** – This study provides useful guidance for managers on how to build and maintain trust in HEIs.

**Originality/value** – The issue of trust building in HEIs is relatively new and therefore has not been sufficiently recognised to date. This study is the first to the author’s knowledge to comprehensively address the problem of trust building, pointing out the mechanisms on which the formation of trust in HEIs is based. This study provides a novel contribution to the limited literature on trust violation and trust repair in HEIs.

**Keywords** Trust building mechanism, Trust violation, Trust repair, HEIs, Student–university/university representatives relations

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The conditions in which higher education institutions (HEIs) operate have become more complex and unpredictable in recent decades (Cho, 2017). High competitiveness requires HEIs to develop competencies that were not previously required such as management of relationships with their students, preparing students to compete in the job market, caring about the development of the brand, position in rankings and monitoring of performance (Langrafe *et al.*, 2020).

As a result of the changes indicated, HEIs are evolving towards business organisations. They are also increasingly adopting models to assess the quality, performance and outcomes of organizational culture (Holloway and Brass, 2018). The treatment of HEIs increasingly as businesses is also resulting in changes in attitudes towards students, who are beginning to be

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treated increasingly as customers (Bunce *et al.*, 2017). The identification of students with the customers and universities with service providers is causing opposition among academics due to concerns that it may negatively affect the quality of teaching (Latif *et al.*, 2019).

At the same time, it gives rise to the need for increasing concern for student satisfaction (Fernandes *et al.*, 2013; Vazquez *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, HEIs are also evolving towards socially responsible organisations that influence socio-economic development by shaping human capital knowledge creation and dissemination. As HEIs should have a servant role towards stakeholders, the quality of interactions with stakeholders should co-create their value (Laurett *et al.*, 2022). This also results in an increased interest by universities as well as other policy decision makers in the well-being of students (Ogunmokun *et al.*, 2022).

At the same time described changes also affect the nature of the relationships created within HEIs. HEIs have evolved from being centers of social embedding to being providers of education understood as a set of competencies that enable high levels of so-called “employability” (Kezar, 2014). The massification of education has meant that individual lecturer–student relationships have largely been replaced by lecturer–student group relationships. The tendency to make increasingly fewer friends during their studies is also a manifestation of change (Popescu and Mourao, 2016; Jovovic *et al.*, 2016; Berechet, 2016). This results in a decrease in students’ engagement and identification with the university community (Gerdes and Mallinckrodt, 1994).

Trust in a social system such as HEIs is therefore essential for the realisation of its goals, that is high levels of teaching and research (Nadeem *et al.*, 2020). Research clearly indicates that developing an identification relationship with the university, of which trust is an essential element, will lead to a more favourable overall judgement about the university. Furthermore, when this is the case, students are more likely to remain satisfied with the university, even if their expectations are not fully met by the university (Mallika Appuhamilage and Torii, 2019). The indicated changes and research findings prompt a study on the mechanisms of building and rebuilding trust at HEIs. This is because trust is an essential element in relationship building (Dirks and Ferrin, 2002), influences students’ emotional connection to the university (Komljenovic, 2019), students’ perceived service quality (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2001) and their overall satisfaction with studying (Rojas-Mendez *et al.*, 2009), and increases their loyalty to the university (Perin *et al.*, 2012; Latif *et al.*, 2021). Learning and study experiences can form the basis of current and future relationships with the university and positively influence student behaviour towards the university (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2001). Unfortunately, research clearly indicates a decline in trust in many areas of professional life in relation to both organisations and interpersonal relationships (Chang *et al.*, 2016; Clark and Eisenstein, 2013).

The issue of trust in HEIs is relatively new and therefore has not been sufficiently recognised to date (Romero, 2015; Kwan, 2016; Latif *et al.*, 2021). Recent research on trust in HEIs has focused on organizational culture (Daneshmandnia, 2019), knowledge sharing (Fauzii, 2022), university social responsibility (Laurett *et al.*, 2022) or student loyalty to the university (Latif *et al.*, 2021).

Unfortunately, little research has been undertaken in the context of building and rebuilding trust in HEIs. Previous research has mainly focused on the antecedence of trust in HEIs (e.g. Ghosh and Whipple, 2001), without focusing on the process of trust formation and its mechanisms. It is also worth noting that the issue of trust repair is actually completely neglected in relation to HEIs, and not often addressed in relation to other types of organizations. There is also clear support for the thesis that negative events in social interactions have a stronger impact than positive events (Baumeister *et al.*, 2001). Consequently, understanding and preventing the loss of trust may be as important, or even more important, than understanding the mechanisms of building trust. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to identify not only the mechanisms for trust building, but also rebuilding in the event of a violation of trust. As the literature on trust in HEIs remains limited, the contribution of this paper is to try to capture both the dynamic picture of the mechanisms of trust building in HEIs in the context of changing conditions, and the related phenomena of trust violation and its rebuilding.

## Trust in HEIs

When defining trust, it is indicated that it is the result of interpersonal behaviour and a shared identity resulting from institutional rules, laws and customs (Calnan and Rowe, 2006). In relation to HEIs, student–university trust is defined in the literature as “the degree to which a student is willing to rely on the institution to take appropriate steps that will benefit him or her and help him or her achieve his or her academic and career goals” (Ghosh and Whipple, 2001, p. 325). It is also indicated that trust in HEIs is linked to their integrity and reliability (Rojas-Mendez *et al.*, 2009; Francioni *et al.*, 2021).

Researchers indicate that it is not entirely clear what individuals refer to when they decide to trust a particular organisation. In the intra-organisational context, also in relation to HEIs, two aspects of trust are distinguished: impersonal (towards the institution) and interpersonal including both vertical (towards university authorities, lecturers, supervisors) and horizontal (between staff, students) relationships. Impersonal trust is defined as the belief that an organisation is honestly trustworthy and competent, and that it will act in the interests of its members (Carnevale, 1995; Lewicka, 2020). It is shaped on the basis of the effectiveness of the organisation’s management, its mission, vision, organisational goals, as well as ethical codes, industry codes, attention to corporate reputation, standards, formal and informal norms (Bachmann and Zaheer, 2008). Institutional arrangements can therefore shape trust and reduce the risk of losing it. It is also important whether the organisation is perceived as supportive of stakeholders’ aspirations and on which criteria decisions are taken. Institutional trust is also based on the collective qualities of top management, which cannot be reduced to the qualities of its individual members, and that provide a certain continuity of action and direction in which an organization is moving, even when members of top management change (Whitley, 1987). However, researchers have also emphasised the importance of interpersonal trust in developing trust in organisations (Child and Rodrigues, 2004; Lewicka *et al.*, 2018). In this regard, it can be argued that it is based on the evaluation of multiple sources operating at different levels of the organisation. Thus, both types of trust (interpersonal and impersonal) are strongly interrelated (Aryee *et al.*, 2002), and determine whether an organisation is considered trustworthy (Tan and Tan, 2000). Therefore, this study assumes that trust in HEIs is shaped by institutional as well as interpersonal factors together, and it is considered in this way in the study. Factors such as the reputation of the HEIs, its achievements, its place in the rankings, organisational practices, formal and informal norms, but also the actions of the HEIs authorities and the behaviour of academics and the HEIs administration were taken into account.

Trust researchers distinguish two main components of trust: cognition-based or knowledge-based trust and affect-based trust (Whitener *et al.*, 1998; Young and Daniel, 2003).

The cognitive component of trust refers to a set of beliefs about the relationship partner based on knowledge about them and shared experiences. It arises from cognitive reasoning based on observable criteria such as the professionalism of the partner or the way the role is performed and is consequently present in professional relationships (Chowdhury, 2005). It is based on predictions about the likelihood of a particular behaviour of the other party (Tyler and Kramer, 1996). This perception of trust means that one party trusts the other party because, to date, the partner has acted in a trustworthy, competent and responsible manner, which allows for an expectation of similar behaviour in the future (Gulati and Sytch, 2008; Lewicki *et al.*, 2006; Morita and Burns, 2014). Therefore, cognitive trust is based on rationales and is mainly related to the initial stage of the relationship (Pučetaité *et al.*, 2010).

Due to the fact that trust often includes a strong affective component it is indicated that cognitive processes related to the assessment of partner’s trustworthiness do not appear to be completely rational and are subject to perceptual deformations, for example the tendency to succumb into initial beliefs about the partner, stereotyping (McKnight *et al.*, 1998) and cognitive dissonance (Cooper and Carlsmith, 2015).

Affective trust is based on shared interests, open communication, honesty, experiencing positive interactions, good intentions, taking care to maintain relationships (Lencioni, 2012). It is considered a deeper type of trust due to the fact that it requires a longer time to develop (Gulati and Sych, 2008; Pučetaité *et al.*, 2010; Nienaber *et al.*, 2015) and that it is based on shared values, a sense of closeness, friendship and emotional connection (Chowdhury, 2005). There is a general consensus in the literature that there is a close interaction between cognitive and affective-based trust (Williams, 2001), due to the fact that affective states influence the propensity to trust a partner and the willingness to engage in a relationship. In turn, the outcome of cognitive and affective trust should be trust manifested in the trustor's actions, that is behavioural trust (Czernek and Czakon, 2016). However, the literature emphasises that the relationship between attitudinal and behavioural trust is so far not sufficiently recognised and previous studies do not provide clear results on this topic (Ahmed and Salas, 2009).

### **Mechanisms of trust building**

There is no consensus among researchers on how and based on which mechanisms trust is formed. Some researchers share the view that trust is a linear sequence of stages that develop over time from the first lowest level characteristic of newly formed relationships (Lewicki and Bunker, 1996; Shapiro *et al.*, 1992). Most of these models only consider unidirectional causality between variables, without assuming feedback effects, changes in the effect of variables on each other and their evolution over time (Wong, 2011). This approach is criticised by most contemporary researchers. It is emphasised that trust building is not a linear process but rather a dynamic process of testing relationships, the outcome of which provides feedback accelerating and deepening or slowing down the process and even leading to a decline in trust (Sundaramurthy, 2008; Rong and Wilkinson, 2011; de Groote and Bertschi-Michel, 2020). This is due to the complexity and multidimensionality of the relationships between actors in the organisation shaped by ongoing experiences and interactions. Following the suggestions of other researchers, this study emphasises the mechanisms and events that trigger changes in trust over time (Huang and Wilkinson, 2013; Czernek and Czakon, 2016). Mechanisms are activated under specific circumstances and conditions (Bunge, 1997), link events over time (Poole *et al.*, 2000) and constitute repeatable patterns of actions and responses that produce a specific type of outcome (Hedstrom, 2005). Through them, it is possible to explain the variability in trust that results from both intentional action and unexpected mistakes or crisis situations. These situations affect the level of trust in relationships by strengthening or violating it based on psychological and social mechanisms, for example attribution, cognitive dissonance.

When analysing the mechanisms of trust building in HEIs it is worth pointing out first the mechanisms of importing trust from other contexts (Xu *et al.*, 2007). Role-based trust, rule-based trust and recommendation-based trust are important in this process (Kramer, 1999). They contribute to reputation-based trust. A university's reputation is built on the basis of credibility attributes such as its university achievements, alumni achievements, rankings, standards and norms. Especially in a situation where it is not possible to refer to one's past experiences, reputation is an important mechanism for building initial trust (Huang and Wilkinson, 2013). This is because it allows to form positive assumptions about the university and the value of its educational offer. Few studies to date show the impact of reputation on students' trust in their university (e.g. Aghaz *et al.*, 2015). Research also shows a link between a university's reputation and the academic success of its students (Polat, 2011) and the impact on alumni prospects in the labour market (Drydakakis, 2015). An important sub-mechanism in this case is also trust transfer, that is the process in which a trustor's initial trust in an entity (person, group, organisation), results in trust in a completely different but related entity or is connected to a situation in which a relationship occurs (Pavlou *et al.*, 2003). In other words, the situation involves recommendations from trusted third parties regarding the experiences and

credibility attributes of the university. The opinions that prospective students gain about a university through personal relationships and the media significantly influence their intention to study at a particular university (Matherly, 2012; Wilkins and Huisman, 2013).

Moreover, an important mechanism of building initial trust is also calculation, based on a rational judgement of opportunities and threats and profitability, benefits and losses connected with trust (Bromiley and Harris, 2006; Lewicka and Krot, 2015). The building of calculative trust is facilitated by the competent fulfilment of obligations, ensuring consistency, predictability of actions and precise communication (Lewicki and Tomlinson, 2003). The calculative mechanism is associated with the decision to choose a university because it is linked to the rejection of other alternatives and the belief that the benefits exceed the losses associated with the choice. On the other hand, in the process of studying, calculation seems to be an important mechanism maintaining the desire to study at a given university and the failure to fulfil basic expectations connected with it, for example concerning the quality or profile of the educational offer, may lead to a change of university. Of course, in this context a doubt arises as to whether calculative trust meets the definitional conditions of trust or whether it is rather a strategy or a mechanism based on cost–benefit analysis of the relationship (Dietz and Den Hartog, 2006).

The next mechanism is cognitive in nature and is based on accumulated knowledge allowing predictions to emerge about the competence of the organisation and its representatives. In this case, however, it is based on own experiences gained in contact with the university. The trusting person assesses the other party's ability to fulfil promises, mainly concerning competence and skills, but also benevolence (Blomqvist, 2008). The trust occurs when assumptions are transformed into positive expectations about the trustee's competence, resources and capabilities (Dietz and Den Hartog, 2006). Although cognitive trust is based on knowledge, it is assumed to arise in a situation of incomplete knowledge, which has a chance to be supplemented and verified in further university contacts.

Confirmation of expectations through experience offers the possibility of another mechanism, of an affective nature, leading to relational-based trust (Rousseau *et al.*, 1998). It is the result of the quality of the relationship rather than the observation of the specific behaviour of the other party. Reliability, honesty and friendliness as well as compliance with certain values and norms enable this mechanism to be triggered. Its development is associated with an increase in the scale and scope of the relationship, better mutual knowledge which results in the appearance of positive emotions. Cognitive trust (competence trust) is enriched with affective trust, both cognitive and affective habits of mind are formed to support decision-making. Research suggests that affective trust is more complex and durable than cognitive trust, which is attributed a rather superficial character (Lewicki and Bunker, 1995). Therefore, the longer the relationship lasts the greater the influence of affective trust on actions taken. Finally, strong emotional ties, a sense of shared goals foster the emergence of identification-based trust, which is the highest level of trust (McAllister *et al.*, 2006).

The dynamics and evolution of relationships are subject to a range of intra- and extra-organisational factors that influence how trust is shaped over time. Actors constantly test and reorganize their perceptions, beliefs and expectations based on the behaviour of other participants in the relationship (i.e. university authorities, lecturers, administrative staff, colleagues). These perceptions may change as a result of current experiences, new data and interaction outcomes. Among these, situations of change can be identified which tend to have a significant impact on the actors' behaviours and affect the nature and degree of trust (Huang and Wilkinson, 2013). This impact can be a consequence of violations which often results in lowering trust or raising it due to the implementation of successful changes. An important issue related to the management of trust in organisations is also the appropriate response to crisis situations, which often become triggers for a decline in trust (Mishra, 1996; Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2015).

However, at any point in the relationship, trust influences the actions and reactions of actors. The structure of trust, as experience grows, becomes more complex, due to the fact

that different mechanisms, however, influence its formation to different degrees at different stages. Therefore, this paper poses the following research question:

*RQ1.* What mechanisms build trust in student–university/university representatives relations, at different stages of this process?

### Violation and trust repair

Trust is a fragile and dynamic phenomenon, and in an uncertain organisational environment it can break down quite easily. The literature indicates that the repair of trust both in interpersonal relations and in relation to organisations is much more difficult than its building (Kim *et al.*, 2006; Dirks *et al.*, 2011). This is because it involves a more complex sequence of processes, that is restoring positive expectations towards the trustee and explaining and redressing the violations that have occurred. Many theories are used to study trust repair strategy, among which the psychological contract theory and casual attribution theory are worth mentioning. Psychological contract, as a concept developed in commercial organisations, is understood as a belief in mutual obligations between two parties in a relationship, the employee and the employer (Itzkovich, 2021). Over time, the psychological contract has also begun to be considered in the context of the student–university relationship (Koskina, 2013), as well as the student–lecturer relationship (Yale, 2020). Rooted in social exchange theory, the psychological contract implies the existence of rules and norms that shape the quality and scope of mutual obligations, the observance of which fosters the building of a relationship based on trust (Rousseau, 2001). The psychological contract theory posits that violation occurs when one party believes that the other party has failed to honour commitments in the relationship, due to perceived unfairness, inequality or mistrust (Brown *et al.*, 2016; Sverdrup and Stensaker, 2018).

In turn, casual attribution theory is very suitable for explaining trust repair strategy indicating how trust can be restored (Tomlinson and Mayer, 2009). In the situation of a trust violation for the trustor, the key issue is to understand the cause of the violation in order to decide to what extent the trustee can be trusted in the future. It is indicated that there are three dimensions of attribution areas: source of reason, controllability and stability (Dai and Wu, 2015). Source of reason (trustee or situation) indicates whether the violation is caused by the trustee or an external source (other people situation). Controllability refers to the degree of trustee controlling the behavioural outcome voluntarily and to what extent the trustee can be blamed for the negative outcome. Stability is the degree to which the cause is perceived to either fluctuate or remain constant, and the possibility of a particular outcome being repeated in similar circumstances.

Therefore, it is in the interest of the trustee who wants to restore the trust to demonstrate that the violation was not caused by the trustee's fault but by unfavourable circumstances or that it is of an unstable and uncontrollable nature, for example due to a random situation and is unlikely to recur in the future. In addition to the cognitive trust repair strategy, this theory points to the important role of emotions in the repair process. Two emotions are considered in this context anger and anxiety. Anger arises from the belief that a negative outcome is the result of a failure of trustee control. Anxiety, on the other hand, arises from the fear that the circumstances that led to the negative outcome will reoccur due to the attribution of a stable cause. Negative emotions may prevent trust repair due to the way new information about the trustee is processed, that is possible distortions (Tomlinson and Mayer, 2009). Therefore, the trustee should make an effort to mitigate the trustor's negative emotional reaction, which should increase the effectiveness of the cognitive strategy.

The results of empirical research indicate that the initial stage of the relationship is often associated with a high level of trust, which may be due to, for example a personality disposition

to trust or credible recommendations from a third party. Therefore, many researchers emphasise the importance of maintaining trust and preventing its erosion (Elangovan *et al.*, 2007).

Previous research on trust repair strategies distinguishes two main types: non-substantive (e.g. apology, justification, communication, explanation, denial, promise and atonement) and substantive strategies (e.g. compensation, change of organisational practices, organisation restructuring).

Research on the effectiveness of particular strategies is quite fragmentary and does not lead to clear conclusions. It is pointed out that the cause and effect relationship between an act of trust violation and reduction of trust level is not obvious. On the one hand, the key factor here is the extent of the trustor's subjectively perceived damage. On the other hand, the occurrence of the breach itself is significant for the trustor (even despite the small real damages) and may cause a reduction in trust, as it may signal further shortcomings in the future and the need to face their consequences (Elangovan *et al.*, 2015). At the same time, there may also be some mitigating circumstances for the damage caused and, despite the apparent violation of trust, the decline/erosion of trust may not occur.

It is pointed out, that when selecting a remediation strategy various factors should be taken into account, for example the type of trust affected by the violation (Bansal and Zahedi, 2015), the time perspective, that is short-term or long-term (Schweitzer *et al.*, 2006), the amount of compensation (Haesevoets *et al.*, 2014).

Based on the theory, some universal guidelines for trust repair strategies can be formulated:

- (1) Any attempt to resolve a situation where trust has been violated is better than ignoring the problem,
- (2) The level of effort put into trying to repair the damage affects the amount of erosion of trust (Elangovan *et al.*, 2015),
- (3) Remedial action should not be remote in time (Bottom *et al.*, 2002),
- (4) The trustee should accept the blame, limit it to the past and convince that corrections will be made in the future (Kim *et al.*, 2009),
- (5) Combining non-substantive and substantive strategies can undoubtedly facilitate trust repair (Bottom *et al.*, 2002; Yu *et al.*, 2017; Cui *et al.*, 2018),
- (6) Apology and explanation also pointing out mitigating circumstances seem to be an essential element of trust repair,
- (7) Violations should be incidental (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2004).

It is worth noting that changes in organisational practices and procedures are an important guarantee to prevent future violations, therefore, many studies on trust repair in the area of corporate governance include organisational restructuring and improvement of existing practices (Kramer and Lewicki, 2010; Božić and Kuppelwieser, 2019).

Therefore, in the paper, two further research questions are posed:

RQ2. What behaviours and practices cause trust violation in HEIs?

RQ3. What mechanisms are used to restore trust in HEIs?

## Methodology

### *Empirical setting*

Due to the fact that the aim of this study is to understand the mechanisms of building trust in HEIs, the factors that violate them and the possibilities of rebuilding trust, the research

procedure followed an inductive approach. Interpretivism helps observe, collect and interpret information by drawing inferences from the patterns that occur during the event (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). This approach allows understanding students' perceptions as well as the assumptions underlying their behaviour. It provides an opportunity to develop a theory based on students' experiential accounts and providing useful insight into the phenomena under study. The formation of students' trust in the university is based on the subjective perception of the university and the relationships within it.

Students of two universities in Poland and Germany took part in the study. The choice of universities geographically and culturally similar, but located in other countries, allows obtaining more diverse empirical material and to attempt to identify cultural differences of the studied groups.

#### *Data collection*

The main database for the present study consists of 28 semi-structured interviews with students (16 Polish and 12 German). Each interview took place online, using Teams or Zoom platform, lasted over one hour (1 10–1 30) and was recorded (agreed in advance with each participant). The study continued until saturation had been reached when comparing the interview statements. A saturation point was defined as one where themes in the interviews were repeated and only a small amount of new information emerged (Moser and Korstjens, 2018).

Participants were recruited using the snowballing sampling technique, building a rapport with the early participants who then recommended other potential participants (Bryman, 2016). The sampling effort focused on identifying an appropriate community of students, public universities, undergraduate, masters and doctoral and affiliated faculty, management, business, social science. The sampling technique therefore required the selection of informants who were willing to share their experiences and thoughts with the researcher. Data collection took place in two stages: the first round of interviews included 12 interviews, the second round of interviews included 16 interviews. During this final stage, the four informants interviewed during the first round were interviewed again to ensure the validity of the current coding and analysis.

Although interview scenarios were used to engage the participants, the author also allowed flexibility in the questioning by asking more questions based on the participants' responses and going deeply into the phenomenon. Some of the questions asked include "Do you recall how it came about that you decided to study at your university?" "How did the university deal with the COVID-19 pandemic?", "What factors determine the credibility of a university?", "Do you recall situations that were significant in terms of creating trust in the university? What were these situations?" and "What can lower the trust in the university?"

The group of German students consisted of four women and eight men. Five respondents were studying at the bachelor level, five at the master level and two at the doctoral level. Most of the informants (nine persons) had also studied at other universities mainly abroad. The length of the informants' stay at the university ranged from one to five years, with most of them declaring three years. Most of the informants declared their nationality to be German, two Turkish and one Azerbaijani.

In the Polish group (all declared Polish nationality) there were six men and ten women. Five informants were studying at the bachelor level, five at the master level and six at the doctoral level. The informants had been at the university for longer than three to nine years and were less mobile. Only seven had the experience of studying at other Polish universities. The demographics of informants are presented in Table 1.

#### *Data analysis*

Interview transcriptions were coded using NVivo qualitative data analysis software. In the first stage, a workbook of codes (they function as nodes in NVivo) was prepared based on



deductive categorization from the literature. In the next stage, combining the units of analysis into categories was done using inductive category generation, which involved comparing their meaning, creating emergent categories, redefining them and repeated attempts to create overarching categories (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). The so-called hierarchical coding of categories was used, allowing the ongoing expansion of the structure of codes and the creation of their hierarchy. In the last stage of the data analysis process, an attempt was made to define links between various phenomena or characteristics assigned to particular categories, that is intracase analysis. In the final stage there was also a verification and selection of data. Additionally, the analysis of critical incident (Angelides, 2001) was used to identify significant events that impact on trust formation or violations. The critical incident technique (CIT) defines procedures for collection of observed incidents of particular significance and meeting the systemically defined criteria (Douglas *et al.*, 2009). The researcher's task is to verify the recurrence or likelihood of recurrence in the environment studied. The obtained results were interpreted based on the literature.

Empirical source data for this study consisted of:

- (1) Statements indicating the occurrence of particular trust-building mechanisms at the stage before direct contact with the university and after commencement of studies,

No	Nick	Sex	Age	Field of study	Study level	Length of study	Experiences from other universities
1	(S1)	M	26	IBA	Master	4	Yes
2	(S2)	M	24	IBA	Master	5	Yes
3	(S3)	M	23	IBA	Bachelor	3	No
4	(S4)	F	24	IBA	Bachelor	3	No
5	(S5)	F	29	Cultural studies	PHD	5	Yes
6	(S6)	M	22	IBA	Bachelor	3	Yes
7	(S7)	M	23	IBA	Bachelor	3	Yes
8	(S8)	M	25	IBA	Bachelor	1	Yes
9	(S9)	M	29	IBA	PHD	3	Yes
10	(S10)	M	29	European studies	Master	3	Yes
11	(S11)	F	24	IBA	Master	1.5	Yes
12	(S12)	F	23	IBA	Master	4	Yes
13	(S13)	F	23	Informatics and Econometrics	Bachelor	3	No
14	(S14)	F	30	Management	Master	5	No
15	(S15)	F	23	Informatics and Econometrics	Bachelor	3	No
16	(S16)	M	23	Management	Bachelor	3	No
17	(S17)	M	23	Management	Bachelor	3	No
18	(S18)	F	25	Management	Master	5	Yes
19	(S19)	M	26	Management	Master	5	Yes
20	(S20)	M	24	Management	Master	4	No
21	(S21)	F	24	MaPE	Master	3	No
22	(S22)	F	23	MaPE	Bachelor	3	No
23	(S23)	M	32	Management	PHD	4	Yes
24	(S24)	F	34	Management	PHD	4	Yes
25	(S25)	F	31	Management	PHD	4	Yes
26	(S26)	F	28	Management	PHD	9	No
27	(S27)	M	30	Management	PHD	4	Yes
28	(S28)	F	30	Management	PHD	4	Yes

**Note(s):** International Business Administration (IBA) Management and Production Engineering (MaPE)

**Table 1.**  
Demographic data  
of respondents

- (2) Sets of negative behavioural statements, which were deduced from critical incidents of situations that violated trust as perceived by students,
- (3) Cases of attempts to rebuild trust in the university based on critical incidents.

When informing students, situations/behaviours were defined:

- (1) Trust-building as those which result in an increase in trust in the university,
- (2) Violating trust as those which, if they occur repeatedly or even once in certain circumstances and can result in a decrease in trust in the university.

## Findings

### *Stages and mechanisms of trust building*

Research has shown that in the process of trust formation in student–university relations, specific intervals can be distinguished:

- (1) Before the start of education covering the formation of initial trust,
- (2) After start covering the period of studying divided into two stages first experiences and trust maturity,
- (3) After education stage, connected with starting a professional career.

The obtained results confirm that building students' trust is not linear, but consists in continuous testing of relationships, assessment of organisational practices and procedures, benefits obtained from studying. Their results promote or inhibit deeper levels of trust, also creating feedback loops that can not only accelerate but also slow down trust building (Kaye and Hamilton, 2004; Sundaramurthy, 2008). Research has identified the mechanisms that dominate each stage. However, it should be emphasised that they also reveal themselves at other stages defining the dynamics and non-linearity of the trust-building process.

*Initial trust stage.* The first stage encompasses quite a long period, which was clearly emphasised by the respondents before commencing education at the university and leads to the creation of *initial trust*. It is created based on institutional premises, such as: the university's reputation, its place in rankings, based on the mechanism of reputation based trust. Moreover, it is formed on the basis of third-party recommendations from family, friends and their own rather superficial experiences, for example participation in open days of the university or other organised events:

... recommendations from friends convinced me, they spoke well of the university and they did not have to ... I started looking at the reports (S17),

... over the years I heard that the university was nice and the lecturers (S16).

The respondents also indicate that the initial trust is often related to the mechanism of calculating profits and losses connected with taking up studies at this particular university, where a lot of factors are taken into account, for example the educational offer, expected employability as a result of the studies, the location of the university, ease of finding a job during the studies, etc. The sum of this information and experience shapes the level of initial trust, which makes a person decide on whether or not to start studying at a given university. Not surprisingly, all respondents indicated that their initial trust in the university was high or very high. It is also worth noting that at this stage the addressee of trust is the university as an institution. In subsequent stages, interpersonal trust appears, which becomes the dominant mechanism over time. In this process, an important role is

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also played by the mechanism of authority-based trust, the essence of which is, as informants indicate, bestowing both the university and lecturers with customary trust and respect, attributing to them high substantive competence, moral values and seriousness. Authority-based trust evokes optimistic expectations acting as a lens, which favours positive categorisation of the first experiences gained at the university.

*First experiences.* The second stage called first experiences is based on the first direct experiences at the university. In this phase, trust is mainly based on a cognitive and calculative mechanism based on previous knowledge and beliefs about the university:

... I believe that I will get what I came for (S6).

It is mainly based on knowledge, shaped by experiences gathered during the first months of studying. Also on impressions related to registration, the way of approaching possible difficulties occurring at this stage, the quality and organisation of onboarding. It is based on a growing knowledge of the university's practices and rules. It also starts to rely on interpersonal components, that is competence and benevolence of university representatives. However, it is still dominated by the impersonal component. As it results from the literature and what is also confirmed by informants at this initial stage, it may bear traces of wishful thinking, based on optimistic and positive beliefs. Situations of deviation from previous expectations cause cognitive dissonance and efforts to reduce it (Cooper and Carlsmith, 2015).

Based on the informants' statements, it can be indicated that within the mechanism of competence-based trust they identify two main tools that shape trust: organisation and communication. It is the organisation, that is the belief that everything at the university takes place in a well-defined order, and that the activities and rules governing the functioning of the university are effective and lead to the achievement of the university's goals, that is the tool that builds trust.

Organisation was the factor that built my trust at the beginning—the functioning of the dean's office, the issue of organisation of classes ... (S13),

I called the dean's office and with a 5 minute conversation I was able to sort everything out (S20).

Communication is also considered by informants as a very important tool for building trust. The value of being informed appears in several contexts. Mainly as a prerequisite for effective functioning both in terms of content and relations at the university. Moreover, it was pointed out that it is important to be informed about the current stage of a case being processed at the university. Especially if it concerns issues important to the student, for example change of the mode or field of study, trips within the Erasmus + project. Students also expect more transparency in communication and explanation of changes taking place at the university, as well as a quick response in crisis situations.

Most of the respondents very strongly emphasised that they were positively surprised by the communication and organisation of work in the pandemic, as well as by the adaptation of communication with lecturers to the new conditions, which, as they indicate, consolidated their level of trust in the university:

... although the classes were conducted remotely we were positively surprised by the intensity of communication with most of the lecturers by email and phone ... (S10).

Effective communication and organisation lead to a sense of stability at the university. Both tools are credited with the value of reducing uncertainty about the future, the belief that unwanted surprise at decisions or changes will be avoided.

It should be stable that you do not get such a new surprise every day ... today we have this rule, tomorrow we have another rule (S9).

The dimensions of impersonal trust situational normality, that is the belief that everything is happening in the right order and structural certainty related to the belief that the organisation is successfully achieving its goals (Ellonen *et al.*, 2008) play a significant role in building trust in HEIs.

*Trust maturation.* The next third stage is the maturation of trust. Students in this period become increasingly attentive observers who understand the mechanisms of “student life”. An important role in the formation of trust at this stage can be attributed to both competence-based trust and interaction-based trust. The formation of competence-based trust in relations with lecturers is promoted by the conviction that they have practical experience and base the teaching process on their own practical or business experiences.

As students gain experience, the interpersonal factor comes to the fore. The initial trust in the university as an institution is replaced by a personalised relationship with the university representatives. Effective relationships and communication between the parties build this type of trust as it deepens mutual knowledge and understanding:

Nonverbal language body movements I mean these factors, like personal factors, are very important because it's person to person relationship (S9).

Moreover, it is built on experiences of successful cooperation and verification of mutual expectations.

I cannot imagine an effective didactic process without trust (S18).

Moreover, integrity, benevolence, fairness, empathy and respect were indicated as its important elements.

It is worth noting that due to the short duration of individual courses (usually one semester), affective trust arises only in certain relations, for example with the thesis supervisor, tutor, selected lecturers, less frequently with administrative staff. Most often it is connected with the conviction that a given person shows kindness, care, empathy “sees in a student a human being who is interested in you and not only in a student from a list”. In addition, it is related to the type of relationship that the lecturer builds around himself/herself, self-presentation and approach to students. The informants emphasised that in order to create affective trust, it is not enough to focus on the knowledge that the lecturer is supposed to impart to the student and its verification. The lecturer in the relationship with whom affective trust was created:

... gave signals of encouragement, openness to partnership relations, ... allowed to express one's own opinions, gave the right to disagree ... these relations were based on respect ... (S23)

... she invited us to attend an academic conference at no cost, one of the classes was held in her office where she treated us to tea, I felt like she was my friend then, it was a signal to me that she wanted us to feel comfortable and we did. (S28)

It was also pointed out that negative emotions such as fear eliminate the possibility of producing such relations.

... I remember that in those classes I would not dare to make my comments because I would be afraid that [the lecturer] would discredit me and remember me ... (S24)

In some quite rare cases, however, identification-based trust can occur. Strong emotional bonds, unity of interests and goals are conducive to creating this type of trust. It is also often derived from a high level of commitment to the university. Particularly persons performing the role of group leader, involved in the work of student government, activities in the scientific circle show symptoms of identification-based trust

... everything was as I expected no disappointments. (S14),

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I feel very well at the university ... I did not have any unpleasant experiences or doubts (S12).

The relationship student–university/university representatives is non-linear, complex and involves many interactions with different potentials to influence trust strengthening or violating therefore it is difficult to predict how it will develop. It may also be more or less vulnerable to violations. Trust will not necessarily grow as a result of positive experiences, but will perhaps become more stable, established as informants indicate.

*Exit trust.* Experiences that build trust and those that violate it lead to the formation of the exit trust. This stage is the culmination of the trust formation process, the outcome of which determines the possible further relationship with the university. The congruence of expectations and professed values is often connected with extending the period of studying for a doctoral degree, willingness to take up employment at the university or activity in alumni associations or cooperation with the university from a business position.

In the negative variant, trust can be low. This result affects the feelings about the university and negatively influences the willingness to continue the relationship with the university, limiting it to a merely calculative relationship.

... I do not exclude further contacts with the university if it would have some benefit for me but without enthusiasm ... (S27)

Often this stage is connected with entering the labour market and verification of one's own preparation to take up a job, which may also to some extent influence the verification of the level of trust to the university, and in particular its educational offer.

The research suggests the existence of a permanent calculating mechanism, accompanied by other mechanisms, which serves to verify the costs and benefits of particular decisions and actions at each of the mentioned stages. This means that students consider going to university as an investment that should bring specific benefits.

The investment will not go for nothing (S7)

The calculation mechanism seems to be universal and cannot be assigned to any of the identified stages.

The university reality consists of a series of short-term relationships between students and lecturers lasting one semester or literally limited to a few meetings, so it can be assumed that there is no time to engage in traditional forms of trust-building activities (Meyerson *et al.*, 1996). Statements by informants confirm that they are often looking for something – perhaps a reason – to rapidly trust or distrust a lecturer in such contexts. Accelerating trust in this type of relationship is often referred to as swift trust (Robert *et al.*, 2009). The acceleration of trust is based on signals such as:

- (1) Asking the students questions, making them reflect,
- (2) Initiating interaction in class,
- (3) “*Liveliness of the lecture*” (S3), looking for something the students can identify with, that is translating abstract concepts into everyday situations,
- (4) Understanding the realities of study for example how students prepare for exams and helping them to do so,
- (5) Breaking down barriers and university hierarchies, entering into more partnerships,
- (6) Treating students with respect and kindness,

- (7) Letting them into their own lives an example of which in a remote working environment might be “*showing them a piece of home, chasing the cats off the desk*” (S22).

The literature points to differences between swift trust and trust that develops traditionally, over the long term and is associated with repeated interaction, an identification relationship and interdependence (Meyerson *et al.*, 1996). Currently, however, students have a significant influence on the type and length of their relationship with the lecturer, as a result of being able to choose study paths or optional subjects, to select a work supervisor, to engage in extra-curricular activities. Therefore, it can be assumed that a significant part of the relationship is based on swift trust which can be characterized more by individual expertise and action taken.

Satisfaction with studying and positive attitudes towards the university can be identified as results of trust.

If there is a lot of trust, students are more convinced about the university, more confident and more satisfied . . . . And they also want to support the university. If they see that the university wants to put on them . . . (S1)

It was also pointed out that it enables them to show initiative and take creative action.

The study also identified the existence of the phenomenon of “student advocacy”; students, like staff, can act as formal (e.g. in meetings with students facing university choices) or informal advocates for the university (Men and Stacks, 2014). This phenomenon is well-described in the literature, and its value to the university comes down to the fact that the personal words or messages of current students are often seen as highly credible by external audiences. Performing in such a role is associated with high levels of affective trust and even identification-based trust. Furthermore, on a feedback basis it maintains and reinforces existing trust.

Understanding how trust develops in student–university relations/university representatives is somewhat challenging. This is due to the complexity and overlapping of different types of relationships and their different dynamics. Furthermore, it is difficult to separate the impersonal trust in the HEIs from the interpersonal trust in the HEIs representatives. Informants talk about trust in the university mainly in the context of the initial phase of contacts “before start” or right after starting to study, and over time they refer practically only to interpersonal relations. The statements of the informants also show that exit trust is shaped mainly by relations with the representatives of the university

I studied at another university . . . I did not like the disrespectful approach to students, that is why I changed . . . (S15)

. . . it was about the lecturers, the way they taught and conveyed knowledge, it did not meet my expectations . . . (S19)

These data encourage us to put forward a thesis about the dominant influence of interpersonal relations on exit trust.

### *Trust violations*

According to the informants, trust was violated when university representatives acted in a way that did not meet their expectations. Such situations occur when decisions made by university authorities and lecturers are taken without sufficient reflection on how they will affect students. The informants indicated that these are behaviours of university representatives or situations, which, occurring repeatedly or even once in certain circumstances, may cause a violation or decrease of trust towards the university. As the informants note, they may be intentional or accidental in nature. It should be noted, however, that such situations occurred relatively rarely.

Three groups of university representatives who generated violations were identified: (1) university authorities, (2) university administration staff and (3) lecturers. In addition, the following dimensions of trust violation were identified: (1) lack of communications and treating students unjustly/inequitably in relation to university authorities, (2) lack of support in relation to administration and (3) professional incompetence, communicative incompetence, unethical and manipulative behaviour in relation to lecturers. Examples of behaviors in the separated dimensions are presented in [Table 2](#).

In the analysis, three different categories of trust violation activity were identified.

- (1) Role-based actions—actions that cause violations, which are a distortion of the requirements of the role, and which should be strongly avoided for example giving feedback in a non-constructive way.
- (2) Negatively additional action—actions not arising from the role aimed at satisfying one's own needs, for example negative comments about other lecturers.
- (3) Omission action—actions which, if carried out normally, would not result in a breach of trust for example failure to respond in a crisis situation.

These three actions are very different from each other and may have a different impact on trust. Preliminary findings indicate that the behaviours of the second category are perceived the worst by the respondents. Thus, on the one hand, university representatives should avoid behaviours of the first and second categories and be proactive with regard to behaviours of the third category.

The behaviours of the university representatives presented in [Table 2](#) often strain the trust, however, its drop does not occur immediately. It is, as informants indicate, a gradual process analogous to the process of erosion ([Elangovan et al., 2015](#)). Because students make a careful selection of the university where they wish to study, they come to a university with a high initial trust. This is accompanied by optimism and positive attitudes formed over the years. Consequently, a common response to situations of violations of trust is to trigger a reduction in cognitive dissonance which, in this case, stems from the discrepancy between predictions and real events ([Cooper and Carlsmith, 2015](#)).

The respondents indicated that a breach of trust is connected with two stages: the triggering event and its assessment, which takes place in a certain time perspective. This is when doubts are raised, questions arise, it is necessary to obtain additional information or consult the occurring events with colleagues or university representatives. Such a situation is often accompanied by negative emotions such as anger, fear and surprise. The effect of such events may be a decrease in trust, but not its total loss. From the statements of the respondents, those of them who experienced such violations indicate that they verified their perception of the university and perceive it more realistically.

... now I think that the university is like a regular company where various things happen ... I know that you have to be skilful in your movements ... skilful in your speech, you sometimes have to keep silent about certain things, you just have to be careful ... (S27)

when I was bachelor I considered university as my home ... , but now I know that university is a kind of temporary place ... so university is just ... an institution. (S9)

It should also be noted that these events are subjectively assessed by the respondents and have a varying impact on their level of trust. In this context, it can be noted that loss of trust can be related even to a seemingly trivial event such as an unfunny joke.

So one small sexist joke ... or about LGBT and other groups, or about some nationalities ... can destroy the trust. (S4)

	Dimensions	Examples of behavior
University authorities	Communicating insufficiently	Information provided by university authorities was inadequate Information was provided late Too long waiting time for decisions relevant to students Lack of response in crisis situations
Administration staff	Treating students unjustly/ inequitably Lack of support from administration staff	Exhibits favouritism and/or other unfair, unequal or discriminatory treatment of students providing incomplete and/or incorrect information discrepancies in the knowledge of employees in the same position how to solve a given problem disregard for students' problems unwillingness to help in demanding (requiring additional effort) situations
Lecturers	Professional incompetence  Communicative incompetence  Unethical and manipulative behaviour	poor quality of classes discussions on topics not related to the subject matter of the classes not taking into account the requests and needs of students lack of contact with the lecturer long lack of response to e-mails giving feedback in a non-constructive way not providing feedback discriminatory remarks towards women racist remarks about representatives of other ethnic groups negative comments about other lecturers non-compliance of the applied assessment criteria with the declared ones giving a task and not checking it declaring openness to discussion and tolerance and then penalising comments declaring a choice, e.g. how to complete a course, and then guiding to the preferred solution notoriously postponing and "forgetting" students' questions

**Table 2.**  
Identified trust violations at the university

On the basis of the informants' statements it can be concluded that for most of them there is a certain acceptance of the "eccentricities of professors", for example long time for answering e-mails. At the same time students indicate that good communication with the lecturer is an expression of respect for the student and willingness to devote their time to him/her. The result of poor communication is more often an unwillingness to continue the relationship with the person, rather than a general decrease in trust towards the university. This is an example of behaviour classified more as a generalised attribute of a lecturer, not directly related to the student.

Many respondents indicated that they do not pay much attention to minor violations, stressing that negative events that violate trust are infrequent and are compensated by positive events created by lecturers in whom trust remains high or increases over time.

A completely separate category is formed by situations of serious violations, which have obviously harmed the informant or his/her colleagues. They usually evoke negative emotions, a sense of harm or unfair treatment.

The following quote is an interesting illustration of such a situation when, despite a serious violation, there has been no permanent decline in trust.



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I entered the meeting . . . and my hands dropped. I did not expect that there would be two gentlemen who sat across from me, and I felt completely trapped. They did not talk to me to solve the problem but to convince me that I was making a problem and that I should stop . . . At some point I got scared . . . After some time I realised that it was just an episode which does not define this university . . . the people who were responsible for what happened were no longer the decision makers . . . I realised that there are people who are involved in this case to solve it. (S25)

This situation highlights the complexity and dynamics of trust relations that are formed on the basis of experiences, their analysis, the actions of various actors and their mutual interactions (Buttris and Wilkinson, 2006).

As a completely different case of trust violation can be qualified by the insincerity described by one of the informants on the part of the lecturer consisting in encouraging open discussion and then punishing with retaliatory behaviour for statements not in line with the lecturer's beliefs. Such incidents can cause a loss of trust and have a negative impact on the image of the university.

. . . the student will be more careful with his words because he may face such a reaction in the future . . . I spoke out twice and decided not to risk it again. (S19)

The violation resulted in unpleasant consequences for the student, related to a negative evaluation of his behaviour.

In cases of serious violations and lack of help from the university authorities, there is a loss of trust, which is unfortunately irreversible and often associated with a change of university. Such a case was mentioned in one of the interviews.

### *Rebuilding trust*

The majority of respondents indicated that they did not notice the existence of formal practices/procedures for rebuilding trust in the surveyed universities. They saw the biggest problem in the fact that the university authorities may not be aware that trust has been eroded.

First of all they have to find out . . . what they did that damaged the trust towards the students (S11)

This problem therefore poses a challenge for university authorities, who according to the respondents should assume that such violations will occur and try to prevent them. They also stressed that a student's stay at a university is limited to a few years and that it is easy to identify in the process the important points/elements affecting student trust and to monitor them more carefully.

So I think that there are some critical points in this process [trust building] and critical person, critical events . . . They should be aware of it so. (S2)

The following remedies were suggested such as: monitoring the teaching process and student satisfaction, wider dialogue with students, debates on equity, equal treatment, publicising the introduction of changes, improvements in processes at the university also aimed at trust repair. It was also pointed out that the more severe the violation of trust the more serious the consequences for the student and the less likely it seems to be restored.

It was also pointed out that due to the fact that students have classes with the lecturer for one semester it is difficult to rebuild a violated trust in the student-lecturer relationship. The respondents indicate that rebuilding trust in the relationship with the lecturer, if the reason for its decline is the poor quality of classes or ignoring the educational needs of the student group, is difficult. They emphasise that if the lecturer does not realise, for example on the basis of repeated questions, that the students have not understood the discussed issues, they themselves have little possibility to convey this information directly. This is due to the feeling

of distance and lack of readiness to give feedback openly. Feedback given after the class in an anonymous way does not make it possible to implement corrective actions. Some of the informants indicated that they are not willing to give feedback to the lecturers, who did not fulfil their expectations.

... but then sometimes I'm just happy if the course is finished and I do not have to ... see that professor again. So I just want to finish with it and just yeah. I do not even want to evaluate him, even though I probably should. (S3)

The majority of respondents stressed that damaged trust can be rebuilt spontaneously if it is sporadic in nature.

I think people forget that something has happened and trust has been damaged ... over time it can rebuild if everything else is fine ... you just forget one thing that happened, but if there are more and you are constantly disappointed then this decline is permanent. (S4)

The multiplicity of relationships in the university and the variation in their intensity means that the lack of a corrective reaction from the actor who committed the trust violation is often compensated by other actors by, for example giving help or information

... if you see incompetent people, trust flies right away ... this person builds the image of the organisation. Someone next has to rebuild it ... (S11)

However, Informants identified mechanisms to rebuild trust on an ad hoc basis, which are used both in lecturer–student relationships and at the authority–student level. These are presented in [Table 3](#), together with example quotes illustrating them.

The examples presented in [Table 3](#) showcase rebuilding trust in relation to groups rather than individuals. The informants confirmed in their statements that the reaction in the case of violations is more effective if it concerns a group of students. An individual student experiencing a violation, especially if it is of weak or moderate severity, most often does not report it. It also appears that the apology that is so obvious in a trust violation situation is not a frequently used remedy.

Is important and the lecturer should not ... be afraid of sometimes apologizing to the students that you know. I'm sorry it was my mistake. I apologize ... (S11)

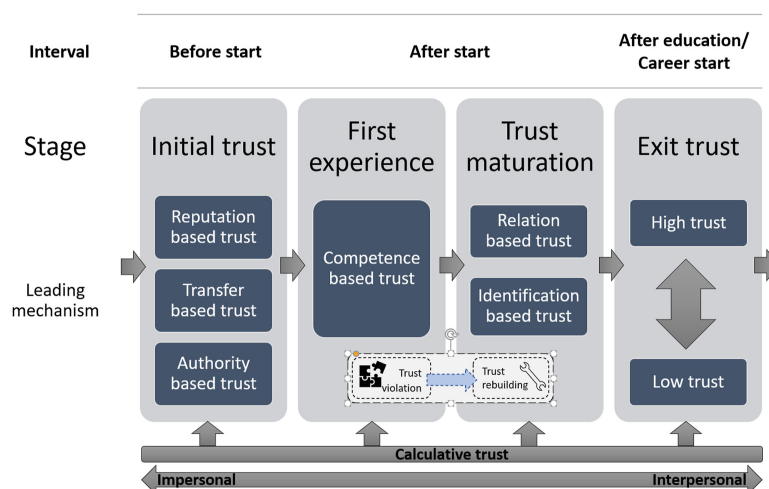
Unfortunately, in many cases students indicated that despite the violation no action was taken to rebuild trust. Students also highlighted the fact that in some cases, information about the violation did not reach the violators, either because it was not reported or because the violator displayed persistent perceptual defensiveness by ignoring the fact of the violation.

## Discussion

Organisational relationships of any type, regardless of their specifics, require trust to be satisfactory. Despite a rich literature on trust, little research has been devoted to trust in HEIs, even less to its rebuilding. This article seeks to partially fill this gap by identifying the mechanisms that play a role in the process of trust building in HEIs. This study is the first, to the author's knowledge, to look at the three parallel processes of trust building, trust loss and trust rebuilding to provide a more comprehensive picture of the relationships taking place between students, HEIs and their representatives. The study confirmed the current view in the literature that student–university trust building is a dynamic process based on impersonal and interpersonal experiences that occurs based on well-recognised mechanisms ([Huang and Wilkinson, 2013](#)). The stages described together with the dominant mechanisms along with possible trust violation and rebuilding (marked with a dotted line) are shown in [Figure 1](#).

No	Mechanism	Quotes
1	Explanation	We had a big problem with the lecturer . . . He lost his temper . . . in one class he turned to us . . . you cannot call it an apology, but he explained to us what this behaviour was due to his private family problems . . . through an honest conversation he was able to rebuild this trust
2	Acknowledgement of error and compensation	The professor sent us away several times. She examined us on different material than what had been agreed upon. An unpleasant situation arose because she tried to blame us for not being prepared. It turned out that she thought she was examining us in another material. Finally, she admitted her mistake. Passing was much easier (S14)
3	Revision of a decision not accepted by students	The number of students decreased . . . there was a decision to reduce the groups . . . they decided to close down the sixth group and assign us to the first five. We wrote a protest to the Dean, saying that someone had decided for us and that we would like it to be resolved differently. The result was . . . we were divided alphabetically and our group stayed together. Despite the loss of trust . . . the solution has fully compensated for this. (S26)
4	Improvement of procedures	. . . all the possible forms for documents to rewrite grades, to choose, to change the promoter or the subject of the thesis have appeared on the website . . . you do not have to deal with these matters in the dean's office just submit the form . . . it saves a lot of time (S20)
5	Information and consultation meeting	. . . A meeting was held to seek opinions on what could be improved in doctoral studies. When we said that it would be worth changing some of the lecturers, the answer was that some things could not be done, in fact they could not be done right away. I understood that maybe in the future it could be done. Just the fact that they wanted us to be informed was positive . . . (S27)

**Table 3.** Mechanisms for rebuilding trust identified in the surveyed HEIs



**Figure 1.** The trust formation process in HEIs

The figure presents the various stages and mechanisms of trust formation in HEIs. It also presents the optional possibility of the emergence of a trust violation, which can lead to the decomposition of the student's previous perception causing the need for corrective action. As noted by respondents, over time, either trust is partially or completely rebuilt through action taken by the violator or by other HEI staff providing help or support to the student/group. In rare cases, rebuilding does not occur which can lead to a lower exit trust or cause a premature severance of the relationship with the university.

The student–university/university representative relationship is a special, unusual relationship that is associated with the occurrence of strong initial trust despite the lack of a previous interaction history (McKnight *et al.*, 1998; Weber *et al.*, 2004). This phenomenon is linked to the reputation of the university, the relatively high level of social trust that universities enjoy, the intensive transfer of trust and the organisational rules that make university actions highly predictable. The specificity of trust at the university is also determined by the time of studying, usually limited to a few years, during which subsequent stages and the mechanisms shaping them can be easily distinguished. It is also relatively easy to identify critical elements in the process of trust formation, however, their monitoring and sensitisation to trust building at the level of the whole organisation is undoubtedly a difficult and complex task requiring strategic action and attention.

The initial, often idealised image of the university in the eyes of students is verified and usually becomes slightly more realistic as a result of experience and comparison of expectations with reality. Nevertheless, it should be emphasised that the level of informant trust, although decreasing slightly, still remains relatively high (it is a declared decrease by 1–2 points on a 10 point scale). Some informants declare that the trust has not changed or even increased in the case of three people. However, this seems to be linked to the lack of reporting of serious trust violations. It is also usually linked to high engagement with the university and undertaking additional organisational activities at the university.

The results confirmed the important role of reputation as a key factor in a student's choice of university (Munisamy *et al.*, 2014) and the influence of reputation on positive attitudes towards it (Sung and Yang, 2008). In addition, a mechanism for creating trust based on reputation and a sub-mechanism based on recommendations from third parties family friends or the media, that is trust transfer, were identified. Once you start studying, trust is shaped by a complex set of competence, relational, calculative mechanisms. It starts with an initial trust, which stems from specific institutional premises. Informants' statements confirm the observations of McAllister (1995), who notes that a minimum level of competence trust, is necessary for relational trust to emerge. If the process of trust development is not disturbed, the final result at the exit from the university should be a mature trust, based on relational and competence foundations, which should form the basis for potential further cooperation with the university and the dissemination of positive opinions about it.

Three groups of representatives of organisations responsible for different types of violations and seven of their aggregated dimensions were identified: Lack of communications and Treating students unjustly/inequitably in relation to university authorities, Lack of support in relation to administration and Professional incompetence, Communicative incompetence, Unethical and manipulative behaviour in relation to lecturers.

What permeates employees' perceptions of negative behaviour by university representatives includes not only clear-cut (obviously negative) violations, but also less visible violations of lesser rank (moderately negative). Non-constructive criticism may be an example of the former category, while an example of the latter is lack of feedback and students' belief that the lecturer has not read the work he/she has assigned while at the same time the student has received a satisfactory grade for the work. Violations were also found to include three categories of actions: role-based actions that cause violations, acts of omission

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and negatively additional action, which have different degrees of severity and therefore impact on trust.

The survey also made it possible to make some observations regarding the rebuilding of trust. Firstly, the results obtained indicate that students tend not to notice strategic actions to rebuild trust at the university. Trust is therefore rebuilt based on current experiences and interactions, being a process based on intuition and goodwill. It was possible to identify five typical situations in which repair attempts are made. All of them concerned responses to a team violation. They were attributed with complete or partial effectiveness. A reluctance to report violations on the one hand and a reluctance to apologise, which seems most obvious in the event of a violation, on the other, were identified as the primary barriers to this process.

The study also revealed a high degree of convergence between the results in the two surveyed universities, suggesting similar perceptions of the phenomena under study by informants. In particular, this observation concerns the stages and mechanisms shaping trust and trust violations. As far as the mechanisms of rebuilding trust are concerned, the Polish students were able to describe such situations, whereas the German students indicated how such rebuilding action should look like, emphasising that such procedures probably exist at the HEI, but are not known to them. Moreover, the German informants seemed to have more precise convictions regarding their expectations from the HEI than the Polish students, and they willingly shared them during the interviews. The results do not allow for any definite conclusions to be drawn in this regard.

This study contributes to the development of knowledge about trust building in the student–university/university relationship in the following ways. Firstly, it is, to the author’s knowledge, the first study to test trust violations at a university and ways of rebuilding it. Moreover, it tests together the issues of building, that is positive behaviours, violations, that is negative behaviours, and rebuilding trust. Secondly, it identifies the stages of the trust building process in HEIs and the mechanisms on the basis of which it is created. Thirdly, it attempts to catalogue trust violations, distinguishing three groups of “perpetrators” and categories of their differentiation in terms of their impact on trust. Fourthly, it indicates ad hoc, informal methods of trust repair applied at the university and their conditions.

### **Managerial implications**

What emerges from the research is a rather difficult to control and predict the process of trust formation based on the subjective perceptions and expectations of individual students and complex and varied rather short-term relationships. However, the research points to key issues that need to be analysed and redesigned in terms of their impact on trust. The importance of this treatment is significant because it is more interesting for practitioners to answer the question of what leads to trust than to try to understand what trust actually is (Butler, 1991; Atkinson and Butcher, 2003).

First, it is important to incorporate trust into the vision of the university and its organisational values. Trust and its values should be discussed on the basis of a clear policy and system of responsibility for its building. In this process an important role is played by effective communication at the university level and the organisation of the work of the deans’ offices and the study programme. Especially in a situation of intense change in HEIs, communication and organisation are the factors that make it possible to maintain the sense of stability and situational normality so important for building trust (Ellonen *et al.*, 2008).

Second, HEIs should prioritize transparency, which can be achieved through fair and accurate accounting of student performance and feedback, reporting on university improvement efforts and strategic goals, achievements in learning, teaching and research commercialization, and how university decisions impact individual student success.

Third, it is important to use social media to share information in real time and to make information credible by giving students and faculty a voice.

Fourth, it is also worth taking care to create positive experiences for students in accordance with current trends in human resource management (HRM). The elements shaping these experiences include, among others, creating HEIs as a friendly place for development, support from the university authorities and lecturers, opportunities to acquire practical knowledge and improve competences useful in the labour market. It is important to conduct surveys on student satisfaction and the quality of the student experience and to disseminate this data along with information on actions to improve the quality of the experience and its quantitative assessment.

Fifth, it is important to build student engagement not only in the university learning process but also in academic life and to improve communication practices and build mutual understanding. This may take the form of increasing the range of issues negotiated with student representatives or joint workshops (students, staff) to develop practices and procedures and their implementation. In addition, it is important that students play a more active role in the trust rebuilding process. It should come from believing in the integrity of the university and recognizing its genuine efforts to build trust. Then reporting irregularities and concerns would be an expression of citizenship behaviour.

Sixth, trust should be included in the content of training programmes for university management and lecturers, covering issues related to the areas of most frequent violations, such as: diversity and inclusion, prevention of unethical actions, fair treatment. On the other hand, the value of sensitisation trainings developing competences such as empathy, emotional intelligence and mindfulness should be emphasised. By making university authorities, lecturers and administrative staff more sensitive to how students perceive their behaviour, it may inspire them to change some of their less desirable behaviours and thus improve their reputation for behavioural effectiveness.

### Research limitations

Such a study is certainly not without its limitations. The first limitation results from the exploratory nature of our study and the problem of generalizing from single cases. It would therefore be interesting to develop research with a cross-cultural orientation in order to identify both equivalences and discrepancies between universities in diverse cultural contexts.

A further limitation arises from the focus on students' perceptions of university representatives' behaviour which, it could be argued, may be biased. However, a conscious effort was made to reduce this subjectivity by excluding from the data set any critical incidents that seemed more related to the informant's biases or opinions than describing an actual observed behaviour of university representatives. In the future, it would be worthwhile to investigate trust violations and attempts to rebuild them from the position of lecturers and administrative staff in order to gain a two-sided view of the situation. It would also be interesting to apply a mixed (qualitative and quantitative) methodology to the study, that is to create a behavioural questionnaire based on the present results to be used in the quantitative component. Horizontal trust in colleagues and the student group was omitted entirely from the present research, which would also be worth considering in future research. This would be of importance especially in the context of the impact of this type of trust on exit trust.

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