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PERFORMANCE OF POLISH TERTIARY EDUCATION IN VIEW OF ACCESSION TO THE EUROPEAN UNION

Summary

The paper examines the profile of graduates of Polish tertiary education and point out their strengths and weaknesses. First, I describe recent changes in the education system. Then I move to the description of the process of acquiring skills and knowledge by students, focusing on economics and management faculties. I will also present factors influencing their mobility in the future common labour market. Finally, I draw conclusions and suggest some changes, which in my view would improve tertiary education in Poland.

Keywords: tertiary education, universities, human capital

Introduction

Human capital, this conglomerate of skills, knowledge and experience of all people taking part in the production processes, is one of the most important resources of any nation. It is after all the citizens of a country who decide how to use available resources and opportunities. When Poland becomes a member of the European Union new opportunities will open for our economy, but we will also have to compete with other member states within the rules existing in the Community. It is then that we will find out the market value of Polish graduates, who will have to adapt to the new conditions. The economic outcome of accession will depend on their skills and knowledge. In this paper I examine the profile of graduates of Polish tertiary education and point out their strengths and weaknesses. First, I describe recent changes in the education system. Then I move to the description of the process of acquiring skills and knowledge by students, focusing on economics and management faculties. I will also present factors influencing their mobility in the future common labour market. Finally, I draw conclusions and suggest some changes, which in my view would improve tertiary education in Poland.

The analysis will focus on graduates of full-time, five-year studies (leading to the “magister” diploma, roughly equivalent to master’s degree) at academic institutions supported by the government, mainly universities. Also, I base my reasoning on a few assumptions as to the relations between education and the economy. Firstly, I assume human capital to have a profound, long term influence on economic growth. Secondly, I assume formal education, including tertiary education, to be the primary source of human capital. Hence, I assume that education has an impact on the wealth of a nation, especially in the long run. However, this does not mean that it has a direct influence on economic growth¹. As a logical conclusion of those assumptions, I find that a high number of students at academic institutions of a high quality is a goal that should be pursued by any government.

1. Current state of tertiary education in Poland

The rising number of young people who study at universities and other academic institutions in Poland, shows clearly that the awareness of the need of education is widespread. Since 1989 the number of people attending vocational, three-year secondary schools, which offered specialised, narrow education that became quickly obsolete, has been steadily falling. On the other hand, more and more people have been choosing lyceums (high schools) or technical lyceums and then continuing their education at university level schools. The trend is clearly still strong: in the academic year 1990/1991 there were only 404 thousand people studying at higher education institutions, by 1997/1998 the number rose to 1.09 million to reach 1.43 million in 1999/2000 and 1.71 million in 2001/2002. It is worth noting that the rise of the number of students attending private schools has risen at an even faster rate: from 89 thousand in 1995/1996 to 419 thousand in 1999/2000, and 508 thousand in 2001/2002. The comparison with other European countries also gives a positive outlook on education in Poland; the table below compares the changes in the number of students per 10 thousand inhabitants. The comparison looks even better when we note that in 2000 the ratio reached 404 students.

¹ Helliwell J. F., *The Contribution of Human and Social Capital to Sustained Economic Growth and Well-Being*, Symposium Report, OECD Conference Papers 2001, www.oecd.org; and Bassanini, A. i Scarpetta S., *Does Human Capital Matter For Growth In Oecd Countries? Evidence From Pooled Mean-Group Estimates*, OECD, Economics Department Working Papers No. 282, 2001, www.oecd.org/eco; or Becker G. S., Tamura R. F., Murphy K. M., *Human Capital, Fertility and Economic Growth*, NBER Working Papers No. 3414, 1990, www.nber.org; as well as Cohen D. i Soto M., *Growth and Human Capital: Good Data, Good Results*, OECD Development Centre Technical Paper No. 179, 2001, www.oecd.org.

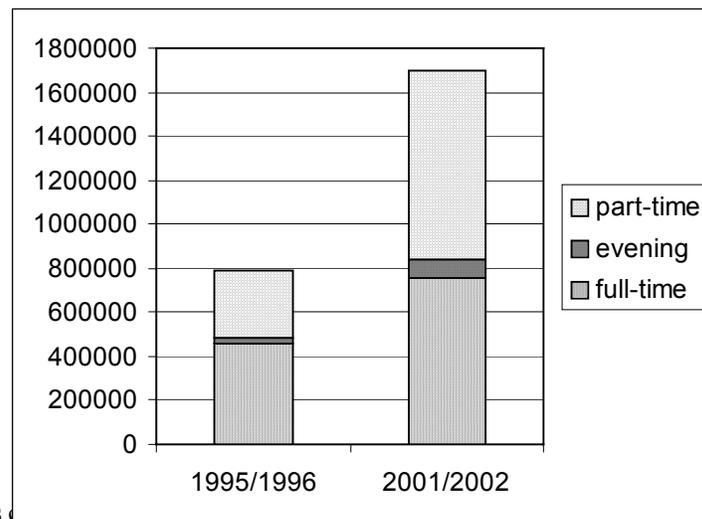
Table 1. Students per 10 thousand inhabitants.

Country	Year	
	1990	1999
Poland	134	287
Czech Republic	115	187
France	300	360
Germany	258	263
USA	540	534

Source: Bulska B. M., *Studia wyższe w Polsce*, "Wiadomości Statystyczne", 11/2000, and own calculations based on GUS data.

However, Polish people are on the average still less educated than the OECD average: 29% of adults hold vocational school diplomas, 37.7% have graduated only from primary school (8 years), and only 11.1% hold tertiary education degrees. In OECD countries (including Poland) on the average 29.1% adults hold higher education diplomas, and 27.7% have finished primary schools only, though the proportion of people who have not completed any formal education is higher than in Poland (4.1% compared to 1.7%)².

Although the statistics prove that the Poles regard education as essential for their careers, the question remains whether academic institutions have been able to provide appropriate supply of education, without sacrificing quality. This seems doubtful as we take a look at the proportion of students studying full-time and part-time (Picture 1). In Poland part-time means primarily attending school only every second weekend. Evening studies, which are conducted throughout the week, after working hours, are not popular. Both of these forms of studying are not paid for by the government. Nevertheless, over the past 6 years (from 1995 to 2001) the number of part-time students has almost tripled (by a factor of 2.78), while the number of full-time students has risen only by 1.66. The total number of students has risen by a factor of 2.15. The number of lecturers, however, rose only by 15% when the number of students tripled, which has surely resulted in lower quality, at least due to limited access to lecturers.



Picture 1 shows that the number of students seems to be growing. On the one hand this can be regarded as a positive signal – more and more people do study, even if they have to work in the meantime. On the other hand however, it may result in lowered quality standards and the devaluation of Polish diplomas, since part-time studies offer fewer courses, and fewer hours of schooling. Therefore, part-time diplomas should be distinguished from full-time or evening degrees, but this is not the case – they are identical. Obviously students choose part-time studies for rational reasons: they are less demanding and leave time for gaining work experience, which in the current market situation is extremely important. If they gain both the knowledge, the skills and the experience, while full-time students gain only knowledge and some

² Dietrych M., *Dylematy szkolnictwa w Polsce*, "Nauka", Nr 4/2001.

skills, they will be at an advantage when they graduate. Moreover, by working they lower the cost of education, which is considerable even for full-time students, and do not experience opportunity costs of lost salaries. For these reasons some students are known to have actually switched from full-time to part-time studies.

2. Graduate profile

Under current regulations, academic institutions have to elaborate a graduate profile for every major that they offer – the profile includes information as to what the graduate of this major will be like, what job he will be prepared to perform. The profile incorporates skills, knowledge and values of the graduate, a combination of which should allow him/her to compete effectively in the job market. It should be the starting point for managing the institution, however, since major universities do not exhibit those profiles on their web pages, it seems that the graduate profile remains only another useless piece of paper.

The profile should be prepared on the basis of current tendencies in the labour market in a perspective of the three or five years of study, rather than on the current state of the market. The supply of graduates should be continuously adjusted the structure of the demand for employees. Consequently, universities should have easy access to reliable information about labour market trends from official sources, or maintain a close relationship with the business community. The latter can be done by creating councils, bodies made up of representatives of local businesses and other social institutions, which advise the schools. A good example of an official source of information is the web service “Skillsbase” created by the British public Warwick Institute for Employment Research. The service provides free, reliable data: analysis and forecasts of unemployment, structure of employment, job deficits, and skills structure of the labour force. Unfortunately, to the best of the author’s knowledge, such a service is not available in Poland.

3. Knowledge

Intellectual superiority of Polish graduates over their foreign colleagues is a myth popular in our country. This regards mostly theoretical knowledge – those who work abroad are said to be highly professional, better than nationals of other countries. Surely some of our graduates are very well educated, and become superb specialists in their fields. However, it is important to remind ourselves of a few important facts. Firstly, it is the best and brightest of Polish students who study abroad, where they meet a full spectrum of people. Actually the skill and knowledge of Polish Master’s degree holders vary greatly, depending on the type of school they attended. To draw any conclusions as to our advantage over foreign students and graduates, we should compare our students with the best foreign students. I am quite convinced, that their knowledge will be comparable. Secondly, since Western educational systems are more flexible, graduates may be better prepared for the particular careers of their choice. Polish students are still taught in a very traditional way, with lectures comprising mostly of descriptions and classifications of phenomena rather than analysis. This may be the reason for high achievements of our physicists and mathematicians, who cannot possibly be ignorant of the methodology of their science, while humanistic and social sciences do not perform well at all. Students’ knowledge is also limited by the structure of the system – students have to choose a narrow specialisation, like econometrics or international affairs, when they apply to universities – the division into various majors meaning that content belonging to one field of study is in large part cut out of the other majors. Thus, the only successful student is the one who studies additional literature on his own. However, there are few who have enough self-motivation to do that. Lastly, vast knowledge does not have to be an advantage if Polish students are not taught practical skills and do not develop values needed by companies. They should be prepared to learn quickly, and adapt to the corporate environment when they graduate.

4. Skills and values

Most Polish students, when asked, do not think their studies prepare them for work in corporations or other institutions. This is not to say that they need to be provided with more hands-on courses, which are usually quite general in content and actually theoretical. The problem is that universities do not help students develop important skills: skills of observation and analysis of facts and phenomena under different approaches, logical analysis and deduction of problem belonging to their field of study, the ability to apply their theoretical knowledge to solving actual problems, to assess the optimality of solutions and communicate them in a clear and cohesive manner either in speech or in writing³. All those skills need to be developed by the students themselves, or brought from their homes. Fortunately, universities do help to the extent that students may acquire those skills from other students, by engaging in student social life, scientific events and non-governmental organisations. This remains the only source of organisational skills and values, and is not supervised by university staff, nor is it available to part-time students. If universities do not try to form the minds of students, are they worth the money they cost the society?

³ Morawski R., Woźnicki J.: *Elastyczny system studiów dwustopniowych*, PWN, Warszawa, 1996.

5. Mobility

Since Poland will probably be gradually entering into the common European labour market starting 2004, mobility of graduates will become a very important issue. Will they be able to take advantage of the possibilities to learn new skills and gain experience in better developed economies? Although it seems very likely that Polish people will be more willing to work abroad than other nationalities, nobody in Poland expects mass migration. Migrations are very small even between EU-members. For instance, of some 15 million students only 232 thousands have chosen to study abroad⁴ in 1999/2000. The most common reasons for lack of will to migrate are cultural differences, lack of interest in other countries and their customs, communication problems, risk and cost of migration, as well as entry barriers which exist in job markets even in the EU. If Polish graduates are to be more mobile, effort should be made to raise awareness of issues of migration, develop useful attitudes and educate about foreign countries, for instance by maintaining broad co-operation with foreign universities.

One of the basic barriers for migration are language problems. Although the best Polish students do speak one or two foreign languages, it is usually because they have learned them at private language courses, paid for by their parents. It is very unlikely for anyone to learn a foreign language at school or at the university due to poor skills or lack of motivation for work of foreign language teachers. Lessons should be conducted under the supervision and control of heads of faculties, not as it is today at most universities – there is usually an almost external body of language teachers, whose work is not controlled or assessed, and thus the quality of teaching is very low. The quality of language teaching in Poland is, according to my personal experience both as a student and as a teacher, very low in general, also at private courses. Courses are almost never based on needs analysis, and the main objective is to keep the student at the courses for as long as possible. From the point of view of the universities clear goals should be set for language teaching, and their achievement assessed regularly through objective tests. Moreover, it should become a standard to teach students two foreign languages, one of them being obviously English.

6. Ways of improving the situation

Polish higher education system as a whole as well as individual institutions need to undergo a thorough reform. The primary goal should be to make the system flexible – allow students to choose courses and majors. This would allow them to postpone the decision concerning specialisation until the last two or three years of study, when they have a better knowledge of their interests and the job market situation. Such a solution would require a change of current regulation (the act for higher education) which bases the system on the division into separate majors (called fields of study). Students could for instance apply for general faculties, such as economics, and then chose their field of interest in their third or fourth year. Such propositions have been extensively discussed in literature⁵, and has already been implemented in Poland's best economic school – Szkoła Główna Handlowa in Warsaw.

Another innovation should be the introduction of a full two-step system of a three-year “licencjat” and a “magister” after further two years of study, which should be followed by a promotional action to raise awareness of the new “licencjat” diploma. There are a few reasons for this reform. Firstly, although the three-year diploma has been introduced about ten years ago, it has not yet gained public acceptance and nothing is being done to change this. Secondly, the path from the first to the second step leads through paid part-time studies of extremely low quality, although the result is the same as of a full-time “magister” graduate. Thirdly, a person, who has completed five-years of study but for some reason failed his or her thesis, is not regarded as a graduate of tertiary education. These paradoxes need to be solved for the system to work more efficiently.

Changes are also necessary on the micro scale. Decision processes at universities are extremely slow and inefficient⁶. Although I have no intention of suggesting the abolition of the traditional, democratic institutions of universities, I think that heads of universities and deans should be assisted by staff qualified in the management of educational institutions. In particular, a functioning quality management and control system should be developed at every university. Finally, as a result of the reforms teaching should become the primary task of academic staff. At present the work performance of lecturers is assessed only on the basis of scientific achievements, while teaching is often seems to be treated as an unpleasant but necessary activity. Although universities and other institutions are required to conduct quality assessment through questionnaires, this is rarely done, and poor results have no effect on salaries or employment of academics. Moreover, academic teachers are not required to set a path of self development in methods of teaching, like in primary and secondary schools, they are not expected to raise their teaching skills. However, taking into account the poor scientific output of our universities, teaching should become the primary activity of academic staff, who should be motivated to improve

⁴ *Key Data on Education in Europe 1999/2000*, European Commission, 2000.

⁵ Woźnicki J. (ed.), *Model zarządzania publiczną instytucją akademicką*, Insytut Spraw Publicznych, Warszawa, 1999; and Białecki I., *Reformowanie szkoły wyższej – kierunki polityki*, “Nauka i Szkolnictwo Wyższe”, nr 1/2001.

⁶ Białecki I., op. cit.

quality, and their performance regularly controlled. In order to avoid a situation where lecturers are unable to conduct their research due to overburdening with teaching, they could be employed on the basis of two separate contracts – one for teaching students and the other for research. Their performance under each contract would be reviewed separately.

7. Conclusion

The analysis and suggestions provided above show some of the challenges and problems of Polish tertiary education. Unfortunately, very little is being done to improve the situation. In particular, most of the senior academic staff seem to have little interest in reforming the system. This is understandable, since they may find it difficult to adapt to the new system, while at present their positions are safe and their work easy to perform. Nevertheless, the decision system of the universities and of the country as a whole should not allow stagnation to set in. Efficiency of higher education needs to be raised especially when the education budget is limited and the outlook of the labour market poor. Every well educated specialist will in the future add to the most important resource of the Polish economy – the people.

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