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## **RELEVANCE OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM TO LABOUR MARKET NEEDS**

### ***Abstract***

*The aim of the paper is to briefly describe the education system in Poland and its relevance to labour market needs. It also outlined the situation of school leavers and graduates on the labour market, the motivation behind choosing a specific education path and its consequences, the divergence between young peoples' qualifications and employers' expectations and the possibilities of improving the relations between education and the labour market.*

**Key words:** *educational system in Poland, labour market, unemployment, young peoples' qualifications*

One of the most common criticisms of the Polish educational system is that it educates unemployable people, it is out of synch with labour market needs and does not equip students with skills. However, all those accusations cannot be unquestioningly accepted as, even though the state of education and young peoples' (graduates') situation on the labour market leaves a lot to be desired, the growing unemployment among school leavers and graduates is mainly an effect of the existing international and national economic conditions, the structure of the economy and the changes in it. On the other hand, however, it needs to be stated that if the current, not particularly favourable, educational system is left unchanged, Poland will fail to fully embrace the opportunity of building a knowledge-based economy, of economic growth and, consequently, improving the financial situation of the citizens. Some underlying problems of the labour market, together with the shortcomings of the educational system, put young people at particular risk of unemployment alongside such groups as women, and the elderly.

In this paper, the education system in Poland will be briefly described, and its relevance to labour market needs. In another paper, "Graduates in

the labour market – choices, qualifications, expectations” the situation of people completing different levels of education in the labour market, the causes and consequences of the choice of a specific educational path, discrepancies between the skills of young workers and the expectations of employers, and the opportunities for improving the relations between education and the labour market will be discussed.

The question of how education functions in the market economy in Poland should be addressed. In modern market economies the educational process is seen as an investment, both by individuals and the state. An individual expects a return on their investment, proportionate to its size and length in time, while the state can yield quantifiable economic benefits. Therefore, the state should undertake measures furthering educational ambitions, with a view to adjusting the supply and demand of a given set of skills and professional qualifications in the economy. This conforms with the Davis-Moore theory of functional stratification, which combines the investment-oriented nature of education with a sorting function [12, pp. 27-29], intended to recognise skills and aspirations, and an individual’s ability to hold certain positions. Following this theory, in an economy there are posts of disparate levels of complexity which require different training. The more responsible the post is, the longer the preparation period, the greater the difficulty of replacing an individual by another one with similar qualifications and the bigger the material and non-material bonuses the person may be awarded. These are the constituents of the motivation for the talented and ambitious people who strive to fill such posts [4, pp. 45-46]. Employers pay increasingly more attention nowadays to candidates’ educational background, where they completed their studies and how long it took them.

Increasing levels of education over the last years have resulted from the growing aspirations of young people and their parents, mainly driven by the desire to gain a better position in the labour market and social prestige, which is correlated with a better level of education. Sadly, this creates the so-called “paradox of educational overambition” [3, pp. 116-117], which reveals the divergence between social awareness and the reality of the labour market. The reasons for this situation can be traced back to the 1990s, when the systemic and economic transformation led to a significant rise in unemployment. This mainly affected workers in the industrial sector and agriculture (state farms were liquidated). Following the restructuring and rationalising of employment, a lot of people lost their jobs, and their professional qualifications and a changing labour market made it im-

possible for them to find another job. The concurrent development of sectors of the modern economy spurred demand for higher education degree holders with full command of foreign languages. Stopping the flow of school leavers with vocational training onto the job market, and the simultaneous rise in higher education graduates was at that time justified by high structural unemployment and an escalating demand for well-educated staff. This stimulated the rapid development of a general secondary education at the cost of vocational training, which, in turn, pleased local government, as it is much more expensive to maintain and modernise the latter. Moreover, maintaining vocational schools also implies organisational efforts, such as seeking cooperation with employers when arranging for apprenticeships. Apart from that, for local authorities, closing down such schools meant an additional source of revenue e.g. by selling the disused buildings.<sup>1</sup>

The above-mentioned tendencies led to the reform of the educational system which took place in 1999. Its main declared objective was to adjust the structure and content of education to the needs of contemporary society, achieve universal primary and secondary education, and ensure equal educational opportunities for children from different backgrounds. The reform extended the length of compulsory pre-secondary education by a year, which now lasts nine years: six years of primary school and three years of middle school (*gimnazjum*).<sup>2</sup> Having completed compulsory education, students are given a choice of secondary education schools, which became operative in the 2002-2003 school year. These include three-year basic vocational schools, three-year general secondary education schools, three-year specialised secondary schools (in gradual liquidation since 2012-2013) and four-year technical schools. Conventionally, these include general art secondary schools (granting professional qualifications) and art schools (granting qualifications in art). Since 2004-2005, new secondary education schools have been established: two-year-supplementary general secondary school, three-year supplementary secondary technical school, three-year special vocational schools. There are also post-secondary schools which are qualified as secondary education schools and which

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<sup>1</sup> As a result it led to paradoxical situations, such as closing down all construction schools in one of the counties in the Mazowsze region.

<sup>2</sup> This delayed releasing young people onto the labour market, otherwise unemployment might have soared.

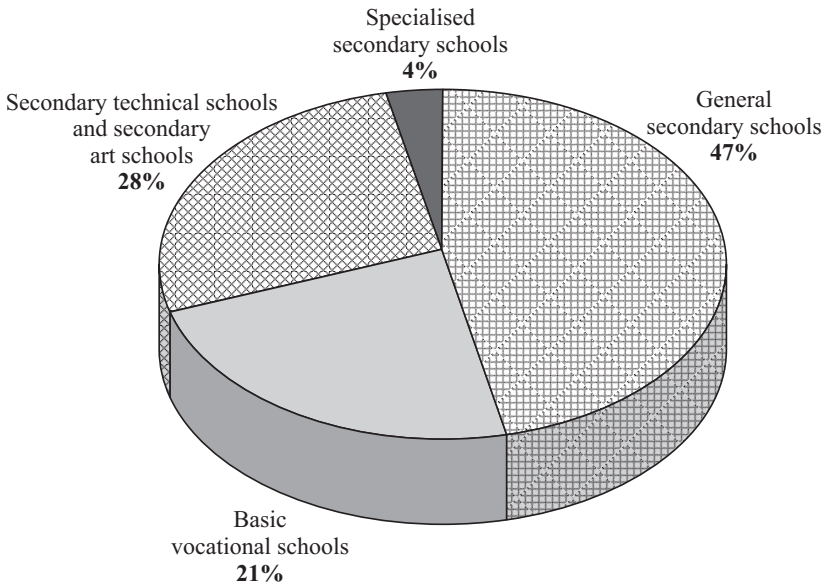
enable people with a general secondary education and a school leaver's certificate to obtain a certificate with professional qualifications.

The educational strategy adopted in the reform was 80:20, whereby general education amounted to 80% and vocational training the remaining 20%, which meant a significant drop in vocational training for the benefit of general education [10, pp. 5-6]. The reform came under criticism from the start and today the results of those decisions are clearly visible e.g. a shortage of professionals with specific qualifications. One of its severest critics, Professor Mieczysław Kabaj, stresses that such proportions do not correspond to the reality in Western Europe, which reflects a completely contradictory tendency; 30% general education and 70% vocational training [6, pp. 31-33]. The reform, according to Kabaj, was by no means the result of an analysis and forecast of the labour market. Moreover, the fact that some labourers will always be in demand was disregarded, as well as the fact that the tendency to propagate secondary education is not tantamount to exclusively promoting general secondary education. The changes were not effected as a result of an actual assessment of the capacities of young people as "there is a certain optimal level of general education which should not be exceeded in any country, otherwise it may lead to a significant decrease in the effectiveness of general secondary education" [8, p. 43]. In addition, it is absurd that the structure of secondary education in Poland is dictated to an increasingly low degree by the actual needs of the labour market and to an increasingly large degree by the objectives of central government, local authorities, higher education institutions and the aspirations of teenagers (and their parents). Unfortunately, this means that the economy cannot rely on sufficient supplies of qualified workers, which will eventually affect the graduates themselves and their parents.

Since the reform was implemented, its principles have been effectively executed, which has resulted in closing down numerous vocational schools. At times, they were wiped off the map in such a way that whole counties were deprived of all opportunities for vocational education. The effects of the implementation of this reform are presented in a report issued by the Central Statistical Office (GUS) titled *Education in the 2011-2012 School Year (Oświata i wychowanie w roku szkolnym 2011/2012)*, which provides specific data on the number of secondary education schools according to types. In the school year 2011-2012 10,900 secondary schools operated (88.9% in cities and 11.1% in rural areas), which is 0.9% down on the previous school year 2010-2011. The chart below shows the 'efficiency' of the execution of the 1999 reform, and the

flipped proportions between vocational training and general education. Later, this paper will outline the situation of separate groups of school leavers and graduates on the labour market.

**Chart 1. Secondary education schools per type in the school year 2011-2012**



**Source:** The report issued by the Central Statistical Office titled *Education in the 2011-2012 School Year (Oświata i wychowanie w roku szkolnym 2011/2012)*, GUS, Warszawa 2012, p. 68.

To summarise the chart, it is worth noting that the objectives of the reform had been met as early as in the school year under analysis. General secondary schools, technical schools, general art schools as well as specialised secondary schools amount to 79% and vocational schools to 21%. The commentary on that chart in the report is puzzling: “[i]t needs to be noticed that 86.4% of students were educated in schools offering an opportunity of being awarded a diploma giving access to university studies (...). It is the general secondary schools that for years have been enjoying the biggest popularity with students and that have been attended by more than 4 out of 10 of all first graders of secondary education (...). Lately the interest in schools offering vocational training has been at the same level. This situation is probably related to the steady demand for workers qualified in

a specific profession which is observed both on the national labour market as well as the gradually-expanding EU labour market [14, pp. 68-71]. It is as if it came as a surprise for the authors that a demand for specific professions exists. It needs to be examined what kinds of professions will be in demand in the short and long term in Poland and the EU and then offer adequate education programmes (the classification of vocational training also needs reviewing) as the existing ones fall short of the expectations of the labour market (a vocational qualification in business or economics, etc.).

In the few vocational schools remaining (1,872 in 2011-2012) the highest level of theoretical as well as practical education should be ensured. However, unfortunately, there is no cooperation between schools and employers, and practical classes and well-equipped workshops are scarce, which unfortunately does not correspond to the requirements of a modern, knowledge-based economy.

The structure of secondary education presented above obviously largely influences the structure of higher education. Doubtless the highest educational level is crucial to a modern economy, as increasing specialisation and competency requirements, as well as technological progress and ongoing globalisation, demand an effort to provide adequately skilled staff. However, it is increasingly difficult to address the topic of education aligned with demand for certain jobs, as in the existing economy new professions result from the interplay between hitherto existing specialities. Therefore, university graduates should be prepared not to perform a specific job, but rather to apply their competences in a changing labour market. Properly designed and executed higher education curricula should equip students with qualifications and competencies which enable them to secure employment in line with their major, and the effects of education and vocational training that students receive in the course of their studies account for their competitiveness after completing the studies [16, p. 7]. Unfortunately, however, the structure of higher education is not fully adapted to the needs of the market, either. Even though recent years saw positive tendencies, if they are not adequately supported by the state and higher education institutions themselves, this sector may not be used to its full capacity, both for the economy and for the graduates.

What follows below is the most important statistical data on higher education ranging from the number of institutions to the number of students per major. This data, as mentioned before, may point towards a positive direction of changes as to the choice of studies corresponding to the de-

mands of the labour market. A significant role in the process must be attributed to the programme carried out by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education since 2008. It set out to stimulate students' interest in the pure sciences, which was intended to reduce labour market mismatches through supplying more graduates from courses sought-after by the employers.

According to data from the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, in the academic year 2010-2011 in Poland there were 470 higher education institutions, 132 of which were state-owned and which had 70.6% of all students, 338 were private institutions. This is a substantial rise on the levels from previous years, as in the academic year 1992-1993 on the whole there were only 124 institutions, 18 of them private. Such a high share of the private sector in education is a phenomenon on at least a European scale which should be ascribed to the above-mentioned socio-economic changes and aspirations for education. This is confirmed by the number of students and graduates in recent years presented in the following table.

Table 1

**Students and higher education institutions graduates (foreigners included)  
in 1990-1991, 1995-1996, 2000-2001, 2005-2006 and 2010-2011**

	1990-1991	1995-1996	2000-2001	2005-2006	2010-2011	2011-2012
Students	403 824	794 642	1 584 804	1 953 832	1 841 251	1 764 060
Graduates	56 078	89 027	303 966	393 968	497 533	

**Source:** *Higher Education Institutions and their Finances in 2011 (Szkoły wyższe i ich finanse w 2011 r.)*, GUS, Warszawa 2012, p. 28.

The data presented above attests to the remarkable speed of the rise in the number of higher education institutions, as well as their students and graduates. It is worth noting that since 2010-2011 the number of students has decreased, which is explained by the demographic situation, not a reduced interest in studying.

The focus on general secondary education in Poland further determines the choices of subjects studied. In the 2011-2012 academic year the largest group of students was in economic and administrative studies (21.9%) and teaching and social studies (11.2%), which – though popular for many years – have recently lost popularity, architecture and construction as well as technical engineering are attracting more and more applicants. The Ministry of Science and Higher Education on 28<sup>th</sup> of

February 2012 published on their website a list of the most popular majors over recent years. It confirms the clearly positive tendency among students as to their choice of studies. The most important figures can be found below.

Table 2

**The most popular full-time undergraduate and graduate majors in 2007-2012  
(over 10,000 applications, against the overall number of applications)**

Major	Academic year 2007-2008	Academic year 2010-2011	Academic year 2012-2013
Computer Science	18,890	25,435	30,639
Business Management	27,707	37,743	27,579
Law	31,827	26,943	24,895
General Engineering	16,179	30,944	24,969
Education Studies	37,490	30,414	20,215
Economics	22,026	24,539	20,202
Environmental Engineering	below 10,000	19,370	18,973
Management and Production Engineering	below 10,000	16,806	17,654
Accounting and Finance	10,804	19,997	17,642
Engineering and Machinery Design	below 10,000	15,192	17,209
Spatial Development	below 10,000	13,087	16,854
Automatic Control Engineering and Robotics	below 10,000	14,207	15,815
Psychology	14,961	19,021	15,621
Administration	21,014	19,255	14,869
Tourism and Recreation	16,746	15,339	13,439

**Source:** [http://www.nauka.gov.pl/g2/oryginal/2013\\_05/0550d75912d508101f1e5b8e5b04a081.pdf](http://www.nauka.gov.pl/g2/oryginal/2013_05/0550d75912d508101f1e5b8e5b04a081.pdf), accessed on the 18<sup>th</sup> of 2013.

Table 2 could be complemented with *Information on the Recruitment Results in 2012-2013 at the Universities Supervised by the Minister of Science and Higher Education* which was issued by the ministry itself and shows that technical universities take the first four places as regards institutions enjoying the greatest popularity with students (four or more applicants per place). Those most popular with students choosing full time undergraduate and graduate studies include the Warsaw University of Technology (8.9), Gdańsk University of Technology (7.4), Poznań Uni-



versity of Technology (7.3) and Łódź University of Technology (6.2). Non-technical universities ranked fifth and lower include the University of Agriculture in Kraków (6.0), University of Warsaw (5.0), University of Life Sciences in Lublin (4.5), Wrocław University of Economics (4.2), Jagiellonian University in Kraków (4.1), Pedagogical University in Kraków (4.0) and Białystok University of Technology (4.0).

The above data most certainly favours the economy and the labour market; however, they are not good reading for the authorities of faculties which were affected by a waning number of students. Liberal arts studies should look for solutions first and foremost in the good organisation of studies, so that the students are equipped with the skills enabling them to move freely on the labour market. Not every graduate of international relations needs to be a diplomat, or student of administration an official, of political science a politician and of economics a banker. All studies of this type offer a range of subjects that should motivate a person (or a group of people) to set up their own business in a market niche. The role of higher education institutions is to outline opportunities and provide students with tools that will help them to make this decision<sup>3</sup>. A highly regarded employee is also flexible, innovative, and so on.

Summing up the considerations set out above, it is clear that the Polish education system does not fully satisfy the roles attributed to it by Davis and Moore (see p. 2). Even if the investment character of education is confirmed, it does not fully satisfy the sorting function [12, pp. 27-29]. At the level of primary and secondary school, a truly – rather than only apparently – effective programme which will recognise the abilities, aspirations and opportunities of young individuals to occupy specific positions in the future should be implemented. However, an important role is still played by social beliefs which still suggest it is necessary or the right thing to choose the path of general education instead of a practical or vocational one. The current lack of a relevant educational offer does not foster a rational choice of practical or vocational training.

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<sup>3</sup> The guidelines for the Bologna Process stipulate that student empowerment in the educational process should be connected with professional and educational consultancy for students, applicants for admission to higher education institutions and graduates. Young people are not always able to define a developmental path for themselves, comprehend employers' requirements and present their qualifications.

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### ***Резюме***

*Цель статьи – краткое описание системы образования в Польше и его соответствия нуждам рынка труда. В тексте представлена также ситуация выпускников ВУЗов на рынке труда, мотивы выбора конкретного пути образования и его последствия, расхождение между квалификацией молодежи и ожиданиями работодателей, а также возможности улучшения отношений между образованием и рынком труда.*

***Ключевые слова:*** система образования в Польше, рынок труда, безработица, квалификация молодежи

