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Career Prospects of Near-to-leave-university Students

ABSTRACT

The study focused on career of young educated adults in Poland. Professional expectations of the people completing university studies in Poland were compared with the needs of the labour market. Potential willingness to change job and workplace was presented. A tendency to start own business by the young educated Poles, as well as taking additional course of study in order to secure one's professional future was also analyzed.

Keywords:

university graduates, job mobility, spatial mobility, professional career, labour market perception

INTRODUCTION

Recent changes in Poland necessitated the need of constant adapting to new conditions. System transformation caused many changes in different areas of life, including polish higher education sector. There have been many high schools and universities offering different learning profiles. In the last twenty years the number of tertiary graduates increased almost four times. At the same time, job offers for them has become more unattainable than ever before. According to the Central Statistical Office in Poland – CSOP (2010), almost fifty percent of tertiary graduates in Poland could not find a job corresponding to their qualifications. Young educated adults in Poland were generally conscious that: a university degree, fluency in two foreign languages, computer skills, flexibility and creativity, and even a supplementary foreign university diploma – did not arouse admiration of the

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employers. It should be noticed that the job offered by the employers – usually low-paid, unstable and not providing any social protection (healthcare or pension entitlements) – did not arouse enthusiasm among future graduates, either. The career prospects of young Polish people were getting complicated by the crisis on the financial markets. Young people in Poland with university degree found themselves in a state of “life weightlessness”, which has seriously impeded pursuing their life goals like forming a family, raising children, taking care of parents, etc. Unstable and low-paid “working life” of young people graduated from universities and polytechnics in Poland was described by Sztanderska & Wojciechowski (2008). The authors pointed out that young tertiary education graduates earned less than those graduated from basic vocational schools, for example, plumbers, cooks, or carpenters.

The problem described above concerns not only Poland.

High unemployment rate of young educated adults – tertiary education graduates in particular – has become an acute problem in most European countries (Russell & O’Connell, 2001; Wolbers, 2007; Axelsson et al., 2007; Núñez & Livanos, 2010; Bell & Blanchflower, 2011; Noelke et al., 2012). It sounds pessimistic, the more that in line with economic theory, in most developed countries there exists an inverse relationship between education and unemployment (Filer et al., 1996). Also Wolbers (2000) listed many empirical studies suggesting that as the level of education increases, the probability of unemployment decreases. According to OECD report, the fact that individuals with higher education experienced low levels of unemployment is well established, by evidence, in many developed countries (OECD, 2000). Unfortunately, now exactly the opposite became true: higher education no longer helped you find a job. Many authors considered the reasons of this unfavourable tendency. Brown and Scase explained that disadvantageous state of affairs by the shift from elite towards a mass system of higher education (Brown & Scase, 2005). Such expansion in higher education has resulted in “producing” an unprecedented number of high skilled workers. As long as in 2006, it was predicted that employment prospects of tertiary graduates became very uncertain. The low rates of unemployment for young educated adults cannot be taken for granted any more (OECD, 2006).

Nowadays several studies have reported that so called “atypical” employment of tertiary graduates is omnipresent even in the countries of stable economy such as Germany, Italy (Gebel, 2009; Barbieri & Scherer, 2009), the Netherlands (De Lange et al., 2013), Finland, Norway, and Sweden (Axelsson et al., 2007). The authors listed above pointed out that especially graduates from tertiary education suffered high initial wage losses in unstable fixed-term contracts. University-to-

work transition became a very traumatic experience – for example, in France and Italy about one in four young educated adult was unemployed, whereas in Spain – a striking level of 44% jobless university graduates was noted (Dolado et al., 2013), as the boom in Spanish construction sector generated a strong demand for low-educated workers. In Greece – according to Livanos (2007, 2008, 2010) – even a PhD degree did not guarantee stability of employment.

The research presented above has shown that the global economic crisis hit young educated adults very hard, and job offers have been scarce in almost all European countries. However, in the available literature on the subject there has been presented hardly any studies on how young university leavers perceived themselves and their own employment prospects. This encouraged the author to undertake a study on the perception of career prospects among students who are near to enter the labour market.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- Evaluation of the final year students' perception of their profession versus the data from the labour market
- Assessment of the potential professional and spatial mobility of the tertiary graduates
- Appointment of sources of information on the labour market

HYPOTHESES

Hypothesis 1: The subjects accurately assessed the attractiveness of their profession on the labour market – it resulted from wide-range discussions in the University Science Clubs

Hypothesis 2: Students of the final year of studies manifested high level of workplace mobility – in accordance with Arnett (2014)

Hypothesis 3: Students of the final year manifested high level of space and job mobility – described by Gurba (2011)

Hypothesis 4: Main source of information on the labour market was internet – pointed out by Atasoy (2013), Janta & Ladkin (2013)

PARTICIPANTS

The study was conducted among 884 final year students of full-time master studies (474 women and 409 men, aged 23–25) from six public universities: Warsaw Medical University (First Faculty of Medicine), University of Warsaw (Faculty of Psychology), The Fryderyk Chopin University of Music (Faculty of Instrumental Studies), Warsaw University of Life Sciences (Faculty of Food Sciences), Warsaw School of Economics (Faculty of Finance and Accounting), and Warsaw University of Technology (Faculty of Civil Engineering)².

The six universities and faculties listed above were considered as attractive on the ground of interjudge agreement method (diversity of the schools, learning profiles, a similar level of requirements and attractiveness of the profession was taken into account). Graduates of the universities receive a Master's Degree after a five-year Master program.

METHOD

PROCEDURE

The acceptance of the authorities of each faculty was obtained concerning the study. The subjects were informed of the possibility of participating in an anonymous, voluntary survey, from which they can withdraw at any stage. The survey takes approximately 30 minutes and is carried out in many universities for scientific purposes. At the beginning of the study students only matched their age and faculty. Anonymity was guaranteed and it was made clear to participants that the analysis of the data would be carried out at the aggregate level, safeguarding their individual privacy. The participants were informed about the global results after 2 months. After completion the questionnaires, sets of sheets were numbered by the author.

TECHNIQUE

A research tool developed by the author "Perceived attractiveness of own profession on the labour market" was implemented. The technique consisted of sixteen statements containing the following thematic sections: – Assessment of the need for

2 The following abbreviations of the faculties' names are used in the further parts of the paper: **Med.** – First Faculty of Medicine, **Psych.** – Faculty of Psychology, **Music.** – Faculty of Instrumental Studies, **Food Tech.** – Faculty of Food Sciences, **Econ.** – Faculty of Finance and Accounting, **Engineer.** – Faculty of Civil Engineering.

own profession on the labour market, – Studying the additional faculty, – Potential professional and spatial mobility, – Sources of information on the labour market. The developed tool also examined the compatibility of the perception of the attractiveness of the students' profession with "hard data" from the labour market. The task of the subjects was to respond to the questions by the Likert scale by ticking only one of the numbers: 1 – definitely not, 2 – no, 3 – rather not, 4 – rather yes, 5 – yes, 6 – definitely yes.

The content of the questions was presented in Tables 1, 2, and 3 of this article.

Positive opinion of the Committee on Research Ethics of the University of Warsaw (Faculty of Psychology) was obtained.

The statistical packet SPSS 19.0 was applied in order to analyse the data.

RESULTS

PERCEIVED ATTRACTIVENESS OF OWN PROFESSION

Table 1. Perception of the attractiveness of own profession in the labour market in six universities

Question	FACULTY					
	Med. N = 134	Psych. N = 133	Music. N = 130	Food Tech. N = 132	Econ. N = 175	Engineer. N = 180
	Mean (scale 1÷6)					
Do You find Your profession as currently sought on the Polish labour market?	5.53	3.44	2.93	2.84	5.03	4.94
Do You consider starting Your own business after graduation?	3.80	3.45	2.89	3.05	3.44	3.66
Do You consider working in the family business after graduation?	2.36	1.83	1.90	1.77	2.33	2.76
Can You find employment in Your profession abroad?	5.27	3.91	4.89	3.88	4.67	4.56
Do You hope to find any job abroad in the current situation?	5.01	3.97	4.80	3.74	4.66	4.33
Do You think Your job will provide You the basic livelihood?	4.84	4.39	4.17	3.93	4.89	5.08
Do You plan on working in the capital city after graduation?	4.36	4.47	3.90	4.69	4.67	4.89

Question	FACULTY					
	Med. N = 134	Psych. N = 133	Music. N = 130	Food Tech. N = 132	Econ. N = 175	Engineer. N = 180
	Mean (scale 1÷6)					
Do most of Your friends who completed their studies in the past two years work on a position consistent with their education?	4.90	3.55	3.74	3.19	4.21	4.52
Do You think that the current financial crisis will have an impact on the attractiveness of Your profession?	2.46	3.61	3.30	3.35	2.48	3.60
Do You think You will be working in Your profession in the next two years?	5.15	3.90	4.45	3.55	4.64	4.86

N = 884. Scale [1÷6]: 1 – definitely not, 2 – no, 3 – rather not, 4 – rather yes, 5 – yes, 6 – definitely yes

According to Table 1, the high level of attractiveness of own profession on the labour market was perceived by most future physicians, economists and engineers. Other respondents, that is, future psychologists, musicians and food technologists, noted that their jobs might not be attractive enough.

The subjects of the discussed six universities declared that their immediate professional future would be set up in capital city of Warsaw. They have not planned either starting their own business or participating in the family business. Moreover, it should be noted that the subjects rated their own job prospects more favourably than it should have resulted from the assessment of the employment situation of their friends who had been graduated two years before.

The following diagram illustrated examples of the answers of the respondents concerning their career prospects (Fig. 1).

Future physicians, economists and engineers were convinced of very extensive labour market demand for their profession in Poland (Fig. 1). Representatives of these professions also perceived opportunities of working in their profession abroad. Musicians wanted to create their future career primarily abroad.

Graduates of the six universities quite agreed that their profession will provide them basic means of subsistence. They also took into account the fact that the financial crisis could temporarily undermine the attractiveness of their profession. Future physicians and economists, however, were the least afraid of the consequences of the financial turmoil on the market.

Fig. 1. Perception of career prospects – examples of respondents' answers

Scale [1÷6]: 1 – definitely not, 2 – no, 3 – rather not, 4 – rather yes, 5 – yes, 6 – definitely yes

STUDYING THE ADDITIONAL FIELD OF STUDY

Fig. 2. Percentage of students undertaking additional field of study

Scale [1÷6]: 1 – definitely not, 2 – no, 3 – rather not, 4 – rather yes, 5 – yes, 6 – definitely yes

As Figure 2 shows, the highest percentage of people studying additional field of study were psychologists studying at the University of Warsaw. Taking into account the difficult situation on the labour market, they have undertaken additional path of education, mostly in the field of economics. Among students of the Warsaw School of Economics, nearly a quarter were studying additional specializations related to finance at their Alma Mater. Future Food Technologists – students of the Warsaw University of Life Sciences – decided to study biology in order to expand their knowledge. Future musicians, engineers, and physicians seldom undertook an additional field of study, what probably resulted from the great burden of classes at basic subject of studies.

DEMAND FOR THE PROFESSION – RESPONDENTS’ PERCEPTION VERSUS “HARD DATA” FROM THE WARSAW LABOUR MARKET

A comparison was made between students' responses concerning the perception of employment in their profession and the "hard data" from the Warsaw labour market. Only those students who wish to work in Warsaw were selected to statistical analyses.

“Hard data” were obtained by summing the number of job offers from four sources: 1/ press, 2/ online employment agency, 3/ university (information boards, Student Scientific Groups), and 4/ Labour Office in Warsaw. Collected offers concerned the second and third quarter of 2010. The obtained data were compared with the number of graduates from the previous year and scaled from 1 to 6 (1 – very low demand, 2 – low demand, 3 – rather low demand, 4 – rather high demand, 5 – high demand, 6 – very high demand).

Student's t-test for one sample was applied in order to compare the students' perception of employment and "hard data" from the labour market. [M – mean value of the respondents' answer, SD – standard deviation] The following results were obtained:

- Faculty of Civil Engineering (Warsaw University of Technology) – “hard data”: 5
 $t(161) = -0.94$ $p > 0.05$ no statistically significant differences between perception and “hard data”
 $M = 4.94$; $SD = 0.75$
- Faculty of Food Sciences (Warsaw University of Life Sciences) – “hard data”: 3

$t(101) = -1.47$ $p > 0.05$ no statistically significant differences between perception and “hard data”
 $M = 2.84$; $SD = 1.08$

- Faculty of Finance and Accounting (Warsaw School of Economics) – “hard data”: 5
 $t(153) = 0.54$ $p > 0.05$ no statistically significant differences between perception and “hard data”
 $M = 5.03$; $SD = 0.74$
- Faculty of Instrumental Studies (The Fryderyk Chopin University of Music) – “hard data”: 3
 $t(81) = -0.5$ $p > 0.05$ no statistically significant differences between perception and “hard data”
 $M = 2.93$; $SD = 0.99$
- Faculty of Psychology (University of Warsaw) – “hard data”: 3
 $t(92) = 3.62$ $p < 0.01$ test showed statistically significant differences between perception and “hard data”
 $M = 3.44$; $SD = 1.17$
- First Faculty of Medicine (Warsaw Medical University) – “hard data”: 6
 $t(104) = -6.29$ $p < 0.01$ test showed statistically significant differences between perception and “hard data”
 $M = 5.53$; $SD = 0.76$

The results indicated that young educated adults generally accurately assessed their employability. Future physicians slightly underestimated the capabilities of their employment, whereas the psychologists – slightly overestimated it. Although in the case of medicine and psychology – perceived employability significantly differed from the “hard data”, however, when we compared it with the size of the differences in the four other groups, it appeared that the accuracy of assessments of students of psychology and medicine was very similar to that of other professional groups.

POTENTIAL OCCUPATIONAL AND SPATIAL MOBILITY

Table 2. Potential readiness to change workplace and profession (mean values of the respondents' answers)

Question	FACULTY					
	Med. N = 134	Psych. N = 133	Music. N = 130	Food Tech. N = 132	Econ. N = 175	Engineer. N = 180
	Mean (scale 0÷10 times)					
(a) How many times do You expect to change Your workplace during the professional activity?	3.90	5.62	4.44	4.03	6.46	4.32
(b) How many times do You expect to change Your profession during the professional activity?	0.16	2.13	1.03	2.36	1.76	1.11

N = 884

Fig. 3. Declared readiness to change workplace and/or profession

Young educated adults of the six universities would easily change the workplace. Whereas a potential willingness to change profession was conditioned by education profile – future physicians, musicians and engineers preferred to work in line with their qualifications, meanwhile future psychologists and food technologists were ready to change their profession even twice (Fig. 3).

Table 3. Potential spatial mobility targeted at searching work (mean values of the respondents' answers)

Question	FACULTY					
	Med.	Psych.	Music.	Food Tech.	Econ.	Engineer.
	Mean (scale 1÷6)					
(a) Would You move to another city in Poland (away from place of residence) in search of employment?	N = 134	N = 131	N = 130	N = 132	N = 172	N = 178
	4.01	4.13	4.28	4.05	4.07	3.86
(b) Would You leave your home country in search of employment?	N = 132	N = 132	N = 130	N = 131	N = 174	N = 179
	3.68	3.08	4.73	3.07	3.60	3.32

N=884. Scale [1÷6]: 1 – definitely not, 2 – no, 3 – rather not, 4 – rather yes, 5 – yes, 6 – definitely yes

Fig. 4. Potential spatial mobility in search of employment

The respondents expressed a moderate readiness to leave their city of residence in search of employment (Fig. 4.). Despite difficult situation on the labour market in Poland, the subjects would prefer to seek employment in their home country rather than abroad. Only future musicians – instrumentalists – thought of developing their career abroad.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION ON THE LABOUR MARKET

Fig. 5. Sources of information concerning labour market for a total of six universities

Figure 5 has shown that internet has become by far the most popular source of information about the labour market.

Final year students interested in information on employment opportunities often consulted their opinion with their friends and family. They also searched specialized press and television. Information from radio, glass-cases with advertisements at their universities and job fairs were a source of knowledge about employment opportunities for 25 percent of the respondents. Only 12 percent of students used the data submitted by the Academic Career Centre. The least percentage of subjects relied on the data from the Warsaw Labour Office and the Central Statistical Office.

CONCLUSION

Difficulties in finding work for near-to-leave-university graduates were recorded in many European countries – for example, Greece, Italy, France, and many others – both more and less affluent. Unemployment of the young people with university degree has also affected Poland. The author of the research has tried to present how the respondents themselves perceived their future career. A detailed approach has not been found in fairly large literature on the subject. The results of the research have shown that the perception of own career prospects of final year student graduates in tertiary education in Poland has been related to the future

job profile. Although, of course, all subjects completed 5-year university studies and were near to receive a master's degree. Future physicians, economists and engineers were perceived as being more desirable on the labour market. That was convergent with "hard" economic data. The subjects have been aware of that fact. Worse professional perspective concerned the students preparing for the profession of a musician, a psychologist, and a food technologist. Their assessment of the labour market has also been realistic – the subjects have been conscious of the law demand for their future job. The described results were consistent with Hypothesis 1. It should be noted that students whose jobs were less demanded on the labour market seemed to believe that they would be able to overcome the turbulences and tough time of the crisis. This may be due to optimism and high activity characteristic for the age of the respondents – such pattern of innovative, 'energetic' model of behaviour among the academic youth is described by Cybal-Michalska (2013).

The results of the research concerning spatial and job mobility do not support Hypothesis 3. In search of work the subjects have shown level of potential space and job mobility. Young educated Poles were willing to move to another city, but rather in their home country and not abroad. It should be noted that among immigrants from Polish workers in the UK only 17.5% have been university degree holders (Okólski & Salt, 2014; Fihel & Kaczmarczyk, 2009). Moreover, the subjects would not like to give up their profession, but, being conscious of the turbulences on global markets, some respondents preferred to secure their professional career by undertaking supplementary attractive field of study – future psychologists, for example, studied economics whereas food technologists studied biology.

As predicted in Hypothesis 4, the Internet was the primary tool for communication and source of information about the labour market for the polish students of the final year. Such results have also been shown by Atasoy (2013), Janta & Ladkin (2013), and Sojkin, Bartkowiak, & Skuza (2012). The results obtained in this study indicated that the perception of the career of university graduates in Poland has been consistent with the labour market realities. The diagnosis of the expectations and perception of career prospects is very important factor in the process of economic management.

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