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## The Position of Higher Education Graduates in the Labor Market vs. Demand in the National Economy – the Present and the Future

Abstract. The paper addresses a problem that visibly afflicts a lot of young graduates from Polish universities. A situation where a growing number of higher education degree holders are unable to find employment has adverse consequences for the graduates themselves as well as for the national economy. The reasons can be sought in such conditions as the increasing number of university graduates, the gaping mismatch between their education and the demand in the local labor market, and their lack of credentials required by employers. Among these factors, special attention should be given to the needs of local economies, as these effectively determine what personal qualities, skills, qualifications and education are expected of employees and what job openings are available in specific regions.

Keywords: university graduate, labor market, education, employment

## Introduction

Each year, a host of young people complete higher education programs, hence transiting from the stage of education to that of employment. On entering the job market, many graduates encounter problems finding employment. As a result, some of them start into their adult life by registering with employment offices as unemployed job seekers [Buchner-Jeziorska 2011: 18]. The position of higher

education graduates in the labor market is regularly examined by the Central Statistical Office of Poland (Główny Urząd Statystyczny – GUS).

The first challenge in exploring the issue is the lack of a clear and unambiguous definition of a higher education graduate, as it is not found in Polish legislation. Although most authors adopt the definition proposed by GUS ("a higher education graduate is an individual who earned a higher education course completion certificate and, having defended a thesis, was awarded a professional degree – a Master's degree on completion of a long-cycle or second-cycle program, or a Bachelor's degree (or its equivalent) on completion of a first-cycle or vocational program" [GUS 1993]), it cannot be considered fully adequate, since a Master's degree program may not be concluded with the award of a Master's degree. Some of such programs may lead to equivalent degrees, e.g. physician or dental surgeon. With these considerations in mind, this paper assumes that a higher education graduate is an individual who had not been employed for a period of at least twelve months since the completion of a higher education program and remained out of work at the time this study was conducted.

The economic transformation process has been associated with an increasing correlation between education and position in the labor market. In effect, the society has formed a firm belief that a higher education degree and a university course completion diploma stand for immediate employability in jobs that will match each graduate's expectations and preferences [Piróg 2013: 305].

Nonetheless, Poland has been experiencing a consistent growth in the percentage of unemployed university graduates. Upon a successful attempt at the maturity examination (secondary school leaving exam), most young people struggle to make the decision of a lifetime to either choose a career path right away or to take a progressive step in their intellectual development. Potential higher education students, confident in that a university degree will help them climb to a dream job in the future, are much more likely to choose to continue into tertiary education [Grabarczyk 2008: 135].

Increasing tertiary education attainment is coupled with declining demand for university education in the marketplace, which translates into a soaring unemployment rate among university graduates. In 2014, Polish higher education institutions put out 424,000 graduates, including 190,000 graduates from Master's degree programs. At the same time, there were 225,000 unemployed university degree holders.

The popular availability of higher education has effectively worsened the job market position of recent university graduates, contributing to the emergence of their structural incompatibility with job market demand. Institutional course offerings are rather sluggish in responding to the changes in the labor market. The mismatch results in a number of tertiary education students pursuing degrees that are not in demand [Dworak 2011: 107-110].

The paper aims to explore the extent to which higher education degree holders match the changing needs of requirements of the labor market, and to assess their employability in the years to come. In this context, the paper presents the dynamics of changes in the number of higher education graduates and their breakdown by program/degree between 2002 and 2013, and discusses the outcomes of these changes for graduate employability, focusing on efforts at optimizing graduates' job search capability. What such efforts are based on is, for the most part, modifications to the objectives and methodology of academic instruction and the pursuit of the concept of creative, entrepreneurial university.

## **1. Higher education vs. labor market**

Both in the science of economics and in business practice, intellectual capital is seen as a growth stimulator for specific countries and regions as well as a determinant of the economic growth rate, especially in knowledge-based economies. The completion of a higher education program is very often considered a prerequisite for a successful professional career or, at the very least, an assurance of finding any job whatsoever. Further, tertiary education, attested by a degree award certificate, informs the staff recruitment and selection process, being a token of an individual's potential and likely competencies [Kryńska 2011: 87-101].

The rapid growth in the number of degree seekers has also been driven by a variety of economic, social or psychological factors increasing a person's chances of finding employment, accumulating financial savings, and improving the living standard (cf. Fig. 1) [Piróg 2013: 303].

In the society of today, it comes as a matter of fact that the level of education critically influences individuals' ability to find an attractive job, and even more on their position in the society, i.e. their social status.

What is very often brought up in the context of tertiary education in Poland is the emphasis that it places on theory at the expense of practical skills, resulting in deficiencies in training for specific jobs. On the one hand, it seems to have been forgotten that a university's mission with regard to job training largely differs from that of basic vocational schools. On the other, most employers expect their prospective employees to have some desirable personality traits (loyalty, honesty, diligence, etc.), speak foreign languages, and be able to operate a computer or work with specific software. This shows that employers are aware of the fact that a brief on-the-job training is in most cases all that it takes to prepare a new hire for a job. Yet, institutions of higher learning effectively fail to offer study programs that fit into job market trends and satisfy actual demand for workforce in a country's or region's economy [Sedlak & Sedlak 2013]. Even if higher



Figure 1. The potential benefits of higher education

Source: own based on Buchner-Jeziorska 2011: 17-31; Zarycki 2009: 12-25.

education institutions did their best to cater to labor market requirements, in terms of quantity as well as quality, they would not be able to anticipate demand in the market in the years to come. It can only be hoped that higher education graduates' increasing mobility and flexibility will eventually help overcome these constraints [Dworak 2011: 107-110].

Between 2002 and 2014, Poland experienced a dynamic growth in the number of higher education students and, consequently, university alumni. The increasing number of tertiary education students and alumni resulted, to a large extent, from the proliferation of non-state higher education institutions taking place under the new Law on Higher Education. The Law accounts for the growth in the overall student population, having spurred the expansion of non-public institutions accommodating individuals who have not been admitted to state-run universities.

The increase in the number of higher education students and graduates in 2002-2014 was reflected in the rising proportion of degree holders to Poland's population (cf. Chart 1).

The 2002-2010 period was marked by an increasing trend in the percentage of degree holders, driven primarily by the proliferation of private higher education institutions that, year by year, enrolled an increasing number of students. It was not until 2010 that the university graduates to population ratio started to decrease, culminating in a 5% drop in 2014. This trajectory can be explained by a number of factors, including the increasing awareness that tertiary education alone cannot secure employability, the underfunding of students by higher education institu-

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Chart 1. Tertiary education attainment (university graduates to population) ratio in 2002-2014

tions (in qualitative as well as in quantitative terms), or a lack of motivation for continuing education. Looking at young people's position in the job market today, it could be concluded that, for many of them, the pursuit of higher education is nothing but a way to put off the frustrations of a job search.

Some youth have become, over the years, more and more aware of how much a higher education degree can really do for them in terms of advancing their professional careers, hence an increasing proportion of secondary school leavers will choose to get a job and gain practical experience rather than study for a degree, realizing that the theoretical underpinning provided by universities may be these days of lesser value.

Students' enthusiasm and aspirations were soon confronted with the realities of the labor market. In 2014, the unemployment rate among higher education graduates was twice as high as at the beginning of 2002. Over just a decade, there were 76,000 more university alumni who had not been able to find employment within 12 months since graduation. Moreover, a large proportion of those who had got a first job found themselves engaged in a kind of work that was totally unrelated to their education. This was certainly one of the factors behind the low percentage of alumni getting jobs (cf. Chart 2).

The 2002-2007 period was characterized by the lowest disproportion between the total number of higher education graduates and the number of graduates in employment. In the subsequent years, however, the disparity widened considerably, being indicative of a declining percentage of university degree holders finding jobs on graduation. To a large extent, the increasing number of unemployed degree holders stemmed from a continued rise in the overall number of university graduates, as more than 5 million Poles completed degree programs at higher education institutions between 2000 and 2014.

Source: own based on the Central Statistical Office of Poland (GUS) data.



Chart 2. The number of university graduates getting a first job relative to the total number of higher education degree holders, year by year

Source: own based on the Central Statistical Office of Poland (GUS) data.

Although the number of unemployed university graduates went up year by year, the effective employment rate remained relatively steady for a decade – a condition that in itself could be interpreted as evidence of some success in satisfying job market demand [Jabłoński 2015: 175].

Higher education institutions' course offerings are diverse, including a very broad range of degree programs and majors. This means that the job market is fed with workforce equipped with a large variety of skills, qualifications, and competencies. For a decade or so, students' top choices were degree programs falling within such fields as business and administration, technology, social sciences, and pedagogy (cf. Chart 3).

At the same time, business and administration is the field that suffered greatest losses in enrolment figures, while increases were observed in such areas as technology, medical sciences, or security services. On the other hand, programs in pedagogy, public services, and business and administration continued to attract the most students, which entails tough competition for jobs in the labor market. This seems to be the key factor that led to a decline in enrolment in these programs at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, paralleled by growing interest in technology and medical programs – those that happen to be in greatest demand in the economy.

The growing numbers of higher education students and graduates were accompanied by increases in the unemployment rate among degree holders. For comparison's sake, while only 4.4% of university graduates officially reported to be out of work in 2003, just a decade later unemployed individuals represented



Chart 3. Enrolment in specific types (groupings) of higher education programs, year by year

Source: own based on the Central Statistical Office of Poland (GUS) data.

more than 12% of the degree holder population. It is extremely difficult to establish which factor prevailed in having driven this upward trend: the explosive expansion of the higher education sector, or the non-adjustment of its services to the dynamically evolving needs of the labor market.

What can be observed at the moment is a discrepancy in attitude between the job market and the higher education sector. On the one hand, education is perceived as an important driver of economic growth, hence prospective labor force is encouraged to upgrade it, while on the other, university graduates' employment and career prospects are almost impossible to predict or prognosticate. Year after

year, the job market suffers from a shortage of workforce with basic vocational training and, simultaneously, faces an excess supply of university degree holders. The oversupply of tertiary education graduates enables employers to pick and choose among candidates with the best qualifications and escalate pressure on their mobility and availability [Rogowski 2015: 186]. Given large differentials in quality of instruction between higher education institutions, employers can even afford to screen applicants in terms of superior and inferior qualifications, and hire persons with university degrees for ordinary jobs that do not in fact involve any sophisticated skills.

## 2. The demand for higher education graduates in Poland's economy

Poland's labor market is today flawed with an incompatibility between the knowledge, skills and competences that higher education students are taught and the skills and qualifications that are demanded by the economy. Obviously enough, the maladjustment has a number of adverse effects, including primarily scarce employment opportunities for many university graduates, which is a circumstance that might, understandably, cause frustration among surplus workforce as well as bring down their earnings and generate social pathologies.

In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Poland saw its tertiary education attainment rate sky-rocketing to levels unsurpassed throughout Europe. As a result, the demand for higher education further grew, fuelled by the rising percentage of university degree holders in the population in employment (cf. Table 1).

Between 2003 and 2013, the proportion of university graduates in the country's workforce nearly doubled (up from 15.83% in 2003 to 29.55% in 2013). At the same time, the participation of those less educated was on the decrease, except for individuals with general upper secondary education whose share in labor force increased, albeit slightly, to 9.14% in 2014.

There is a snowballing consensus that young Poles holding university diplomas are left to themselves, and even the statutory obligation to monitor alumni careers, imposed on higher education institutions as from the academic year 2011-2012, has not made much difference in this respect.

Furthermore, university graduate employment data clearly suggest that, over the decade being examined, there was a major change in the economy sectors that accommodated higher education graduates for their first-time employment (cf. Table 2).

	% of population in employment			
Education level	2003	2007	2011	2013
Tertiary	15.83	21.54	26.81	29.55
Upper secondary vocational and post-secondary non-tertiary	28.75	28.99	27.73	27.22
Upper secondary general	7.84	8.57	8.96	9.14
Elementary vocational	34.30	30.73	28.45	26.98
Lower secondary, primary or lower	13.28	10.17	8.05	7.10

Table 1. Poland's labor force structure by level of education in 2003-2013 (%)

Source: own based on the Central Statistical Office of Poland (GUS) data.

Economy sectors providing first-time employment to university graduates	2003	2008	2013
Agriculture, hunting, forestry, fishery	0.80	0.72	0.98
Mining	0.41	0.31	0.53
Manufacturing and processing	17.87	14.66	13.59
Electricity, gas and water production and supply	1.20	1.26	2.00
Construction	3.82	3.43	2.82
Commerce and repairs	13.0	12.41	12.9
Hotels and restaurants	1.14	1.06	1.08
Transport and warehousing	3.54	3.26	9.35
Information and communication	_	-	6.82
Financial intermediary services	7.48	8.71	6.49
Property market and B2B services	12.91	18.32	0.70
Professional services, science and technology	_	_	10.76
Public administration and national defense, mandatory social and health insurance	12.22	12.60	16.70
Education	13.93	10.82	14.48
Healthcare and social aid	9.18	9.73	13.01
Municipal services, social and personal services, other similar activities	2.47	2.71	3.63

Table 2. University graduates' first-time employment by economy sector (%)

Source: own based on GUS 2003: 132-133; GUS 2008: 136-138; GUS 2014: 99-101.

Economy sector	2000	2005	2010	2013
Aggregate	15485.7	12890.7	14106.9	14244.3
Agriculture, hunting, forestry, fishing	4207.1	2134.1	2376.1	2379.0
Mining and extractive industry	357.1	186.4	172.9	168.6
Manufacturing and processing	3102.5	2400.2	2436.4	2421.1
Electricity generation and supply	269.2	150.5	159.1	137.3
Construction	827.4	661.5	865.2	810.5
Commerce and repairs	1903.1	2068.5	2189.0	2121.9
Transport and warehousing	-	633.1	701.4	730.0
Hospitality and food services	185.9	219.4	237.4	244.7
Information and communication	_	183.2	237.7	270.8
Financial and insurance services	268.2	296.6	337.9	352.2
Property market services	554.3	174.2	196.1	199.2
Professional services, science and technology	-	408.2	481.3	553.3
Administration and support services	-	327.2	411.7	443.2
Public administration and national defense	737.9	871.4	970.1	963.0
Education	896.4	1043.0	1079.8	1100.3
Healthcare and social aid	1003.4	689.0	764.4	804.7
Culture, leisure and recreation	_	130.9	148.4	140.0
Other services	—	192.8	200.7	259.3

Table 3. Poland's population in employment by section of the PKD classification in 2000-2013 (in 1000s of employees)

Source: own based on the Central Statistical Office of Poland (GUS) data.

The relevant GUS data and studies show that most higher education graduates get their first jobs in process manufacturing, public administration and national defense, mandatory social and health insurance, and in education. The following are the sectors that reaped the most conspicuous growth in 2013:

- transport and warehousing;
- professional services, science and technology;
- information and communication services.

Looking at the developments in the country's economy in 2003-2013, it is easy to see that services significantly increased their share in total employment (cf. Table 3).

The most spectacular changes in employment structure occurred in information and communication services; professional, science and technology services; transport and warehousing; administration and support services, i.e. in sections that are often collectively referred to as business services. These primarily

Voivodeship (province)	Special- ist	Office worker	Service sector job	Skilled worker	Operator	Un- skilled worker
Dolnośląskie	-15.6	2.5	17.7	-3.5	-9.4	13.1
Kujawsko-pomorskie	-18.8	-0.5	8.4	-5.9	-1.2	23.6
Lubelskie	-12.1	6.4	7.5	-3.4	-2.0	12.6
Lubuskie	-2.9	-2.8	1.4	-3.6	-11.0	14.9
Łódzkie	-2.3	5.8	-1.4	-16.2	-3.0	16.4
Małopolskie	-14.0	2.4	0.7	-3.9	0.1	13.4
Mazowieckie	-14.8	3.3	2.3	-3.8	-2.1	14.4
Opolskie	-6.7	2.8	9.7	6.3	-5.6	4.9
Podkarpackie	-3.2	3.7	13.4	-21.2	-10.9	18.3
Podlaskie	-6.8	6.4	9.1	-5.3	-1.2	-5.8
Pomorskie	-15.6	5.2	14.5	7.1	-8.0	12.0
Śląskie	-8.9	9.2	2.1	-15.2	-2.2	19.1
Świętokrzyskie	-2.5	10.3	12.0	-36.6	0.2	18.6
Warmińsko-mazurskie	-10.9	5.6	6.2	-12.3	-4.9	18.3
Wielkopolskie	-9.2	1.4	0.2	5.0	-4.6	10.4
Zachodniopomorskie	-7.6	1.1	-4.6	1.8	-2.5	14.8
Total	-9.9	3.9	5.8	-6.6	-4.4	14.0

Table 4. Movements in workforce demand and supply in 2014

Source: Kocór 2015.

comprise tax and investment advisory services; law services; services related to computer technologies, software development and information processing; marketing research; consulting; and public relations. What makes these services grow in prominence is, in the first place, their ongoing penetration into most domains of the economy. It is plain to see that knowledge-based services involving advanced technology constitute the fastest growing segment of economy in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In 2014, there was a fundamental shift in the economy's demand for specific types of labor force. The shift was chiefly associated with the country's socioeconomic progress, manifest in flourishing innovation and an increasing edge of services over manufacturing industries. Accordingly, movements in workforce demand and supply (cf. Table 4) in selected segments of Poland's job market visibly favor highly qualified staff (specialists, engineers).

A surplus of potential employees was in 2014 reported for occupations where advanced skills were not required, such as unskilled workers, sales personnel, service staff, or office clerks. There was, on the other hand, a deficit of specialists and skilled laborers.

By way of summary to this discussion of demand in national economy, it could be stated that employment has been consistently going up in the services sector, particularly in professions where advanced skills are required, such as freight forwarders, architects, website designers, sales and marketing professionals, physicians and nurses, computer graphic designers, software and multimedia engineers, and information and communication technology specialists. This results from the fact that ICTs (including software development and informatics expertise in the broad sense), alongside transport and warehouse management, are the fastest growing segments of the labor market.

Undersupply, on the other hand, affects the following sectors of the Polish job market: construction (civil engineering), healthcare, and specialized services, e.g. acquisition of EU funding, consulting, adult education.

### **3.** Labor market trends in the years to come

Much of the ongoing debate on university graduates' position in the job market converges on the conclusion that higher education, relevant as it still is to an individual's professional success and career prospects, brings fewer and fewer benefits to fewer and fewer graduates. Among a variety of factors that seem to have been at play in downgrading the value of university degrees, the predominant one is the rapidly growing population of university students and, consequently, the increasing surplus of prospective workforce. To make things worse, new hirings have slackened in those economy sectors that traditionally absorb most university graduates, such as administration, education, or commerce.

It appears to make sense, therefore, for students to be guided primarily by the chances of finding employment in a specific profession, as long as that choice is not very remote from their most desired options. This implies that any obtainable information about the economy's future demand for labor force or about the skills and competencies that employers might expect will come in handy.

Studies conducted by public institutions forecast, in the near future, the emergence of new, highly specialized jobs involving advanced skills in such areas as administration, marketing, sales, logistics, or IT. Demand is therefore likely to arise in the job market for all sorts of technicians, sales specialists (e-marketing), and executive staff to manage large corporations. It is anticipated that the most wanted graduates will be from the following backgrounds: architecture, construction, energetics, electronics and telecommunications, engineering, logistics, production management and technology, medical sciences with nursing and physiotherapy, and information technology [Górniak (ed.) 2012].

In the next several years, the labor market will definitely favor qualifications in certain technical areas. A Europe 2020 strategy report lists industries that will create the most new vacancies [Ratajczak et al. 2012: 55-58]:

- support services for agriculture, mining and extractive industries;
- food and chemical processing;
- manufacture of rubber, plastic and metal products;
- manufacture of electrical appliances;
- machinery and equipment repair, fitting and maintenance;
- e-commerce and e-marketing;
- construction (civil engineering);
- transport and warehousing;
- professional services, science and technology;
- healthcare;
- creative work related to culture, leisure and recreation.

Yet, it turns out that forecasting labor market demand for specific occupations alone will not suffice, as many job applicants simply do not meet employers' requirements regarding work experience, requisite practical skills, relevant qualifications, salary expectations, soft and transversal skills, knowledge of the market, business acumen, etc.

Competencies that will be most sought be employers in the years to come are intrinsically linked to changes taking place in the economy. As a lot of businesses endeavor to establish a presence in foreign markets, they will put a high value on employees with an international outlook, who are capable of working in multicultural teams and instantly adapting to a religiously diverse environment. Further, there will certainly be a strong emphasis on innovation and enterprise, since these factors are believed to have a critical impact on a company's ability to develop a competitive advantage in domestic and international markets. Cognitive competencies, too, are highly desirable, because knowledge-based economies thrive on lifelong learning and continuous skill development.

## Conclusion

The analysis has revealed a gap between economy's demand for specific labor force and the skills and competencies taught at universities. This is clearly due to a mismatch between the levels and fields of study pursued by youth and the actual needs of the job market. As a result, too many students choose higher education programs in humanities, while at the same time employers report a deficit of

technicians and high-grade specialists. This trend can be explained by the fact that higher education institutions maintain higher limits on admissions into humanities and social sciences programs, and that these programs have a much higher graduation rate than programs in technical fields that are mostly tougher to complete.

A university graduate's job market position and career prospects are also contingent on the level and quality of the degree, the latter being linked to the academic reputation of the awarding institution, i.e. the perception of its quality of instruction. Research findings suggest that holders of Master's degrees have better employment prospects and find it easier to get a job than holders of Bachelor's degrees.

Best employment opportunities await professionals with degrees in technical and medical sciences, i.e. those highly specialized in their specific areas. This can be attributed to the robust growth in such industries as information and communications, or transport and warehousing. Conversely, the position of graduates from degree programs that were hitherto most populated, such as business, administration, and pedagogy (primary school and early childhood teachers), is bound to decline every year, as these are likely to retain leadership in admissions in the years to come.

Nevertheless, it should be underscored that tertiary education attainment continues to represent a valuable asset and a vital part of intellectual capital, bearing positively on job seekers' employability and giving them an edge over those with lower-level education. While the oversupply of university graduates forces them to compete for jobs, a higher education degree still demonstrably stands for a better position in the labor market.

Notably, more and more higher education institutions are undertaking to re-design their curricula and modify their course offerings in an effort to better prepare graduates for labor market entry and to bridge the gap between their competencies and employer expectations or job market demand.

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## Sytuacja absolwentów studiów wyższych na rynku pracy a zapotrzebowanie gospodarki – sytuacja obecna i przyszła

Streszczenie. W artykule podjęto problem, z którym boryka się wielu młodych absolwentów polskich uczelni. Z niemożnością znalezienia zatrudnienia boryka się coraz większa grupa osób posiadających dyplom ukończenia szkoły wyższej. Negatywne skutki tej sytuacji są coraz bardziej odczuwalne i dotkliwe, nie tylko dla samych absolwentów, ale również dla gospodarki. Przyczyn takiej sytuacji upatruje się w wielu czynnikach i uwarunkowaniach, takich jak: wzrastająca liczba absolwentów uczelni, niedopasowanie posiadanego wykształcenia do zapotrzebowań lokalnego rynku pracy, brak kompetencji wymaganych przez pracodawców. Na szczególną uwagę zasługuje czynnik aktualnego zapotrzebowania gospodarki, który określa cechy, umiejętności, niezbędne kwalifikacje i wykształcenie pracowników na danych stanowiskach pracy w regionach.

Słowa kluczowe: absolwent studiów wyższych, rynek pracy, wykształcenie, zatrudnienie