
Students' Perception of Education as a Preparation to Enter the Labour Market: A Case Study from a Polish University

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Abstract:

Purpose: The aim of the article is to determine the importance of university education in the theoretical and practical dimensions for students-graduates preparing to enter the labour market.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The opinions of students - graduates of the Faculty of Economics in Poznań University of Life Sciences - were examined, discussing the obtained results with the information from the system of monitoring the fate of graduates (ELA) and available statistical data related to the topic.

Findings: It was found that from the students' point of view, the condition of entering the labour market is both a diploma confirming the resources of acquired theoretical knowledge, and the completion of internships and work placements. During the discussion, it was also found that the surveyed graduates have a more difficult entry into the market than their predecessors, which was caused, among others, by the COVID-19 pandemic and the introduction of lockdown. This has led to an almost complete elimination of students from the labour market, which results in the inability to gain work experience, which strengthens the competitiveness of graduates in this market

Practical Implications: The experience gained during the studies related to taking up work, both resulting from the internships carried out in the program of studies, and the individual acquired by students (occasional jobs usually in services) are one of the most important factors determining the effectiveness of graduates entering the market work.

Originality/Value: The research results contained in the article fill the cognitive gap regarding the perception of the chances of finding employment by graduates in the changing labour market, emphasizing the role of universities as an active participant in the labour market.

Keywords: Labour market, higher education, theoretical education, practical preparation, work enter.

JEL classification: I21, I23, I25, M54.

Paper Type: Research study.

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1. Introduction

The observed development trends, affecting the functioning of modern markets of tangible and intangible resources, cause significant changes in the labour market. Although its functioning depends mainly on classical economic factors, socio-civilizational factors, shaping the fundamentals and motivations, as well as the individual decision-making process of employees and employers, are becoming increasingly important. In the era of a knowledge-based economy, the effectiveness of the educational system shaping not only knowledge but also practical skills and personality of future labour market participants becomes particularly important. This effectiveness is verified by, among others, information on the fate of university graduates (e.g., in Poland it is the so-called ELA system, in Hungary The Graduate Follow-Up System of Pécs University or the Early Warning Intervention and Monitoring System (EWIMS) in the U.S.), as well as graduates' opinions on their studies and their usefulness on the labour market. The latter, in particular, is of key importance for higher education institutions as they are a factor that helps to adjust study programs in order to prepare students to successfully enter the labour market.

Research conducted in many countries usually indicates non-personal assets related to the effectiveness of entering the labour market, e.g., place of residence - city, suburban or rural (Bogdanowicz and Bailey 2002; Spies, 2006; Ahlin, Andersson, and Thulin, 2014), additional non-wage offer of the employer, for example including company car, life insurance, additional health care, etc., (Ungureanu, Bertolotti, and Pilati, 2019), the reputation of the employing entity (Helm, 2011), etc.

However, the growing role of factors of a personal nature, i.e., related to the personality traits of graduates entering the labour market, is increasingly emphasized. Among them, the leading ones are the awareness of labour market expectations and expectations towards the education system, such in which it is possible to acquire skills that improve the potential effectiveness of obtaining a satisfactory job. Among other things, the expectations of students themselves both towards formal university education (Osinski, 2010; Kozera-Kowalska and Uglis, 2018) and towards work and employer, as well as towards its soft elements, i.e., workplace atmosphere, sense of security, cooperation, or community and trust (Bundy and Norris 1992; Donald, Ashleigh, and Baruch, 2018) are taken into account. Some studies also raise the issue of the perception of acquired education as an asset for job seekers (Bogdanowicz and Bailey, 2002; Donald, Ashleigh, and Baruch, 2018).

The aim of the presented study is to determine the role of higher education - theoretical and practical - as a factor increasing students' employability in the contemporary labour market. The problem was analysed not only from the point of view of students' subjective feelings but also from a broader perspective, i.e., the treatment of education as a potential increasing the chances of entering the market in a period of uncertainty (e.g., caused by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic COVID-19) and students' expectations

of the university and its study programs, as well as the analysis of the fate of graduates from years preceding the study period.

2. Materials and Method

The area of research interest described in this study was the perception by students graduating from the Faculty of Economics at Poznań University of Life Sciences (FE PULS) of the relationship between education (theoretical and practical) and the chances of finding employment after completing higher education.

For this purpose, survey research was prepared and conducted using an auditorium survey questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 13 questions divided into two groups. The first group included basic characteristics of the students (gender, age, field of study, type of preferred work, information about work during studies, preference for volunteer work). The second part consisted mainly of questions about the perception of the conditions of entering the labour market, the preferred area of work, the expected amount of earnings and the actions taken to get a job.

The survey covered students in their final year of second-cycle studies (before the master's diploma exam) of economics and finance and accounting. The survey was conducted twice i.e., in 2017 and again in 2019. A total of 152 students of the Faculty of Economics PULS participated in it.

In the first year of the study, the research questionnaire was completed by 66 students, (which constituted 71% of the general population of second-level students), in the second year - 86, (which constituted 88% of students studying in this field). The majority of the respondents were women, which confirms the strong feminization of studies in economics, although the second round of research indicates a statistically significant increase in the number of men (chi-square test ($p=0.029$), which does not, however, indicate a change in the long-term trend in this regard (REPORT, 2014; REPORT, 2021; WORLD, 2021).

The collected material was subjected to preliminary analysis and then to statistical analysis using, among others, chi-square test, Mann-Whitney U test and Wald-Wolfowitz series test. Statistical analysis of the data was performed using the STATISTICA 13.3 program and presented in descriptive, tabular, and graphical forms.

3. Results

One of the prerequisites for university graduates to enter the labour market is to have a diploma confirming the resources of acquired formal knowledge, and more and more often practical knowledge, supported by skills and social competencies. In reality the verification of the diploma is carried out in two ways, i.e., divided into factors resulting from the choice of the university (its prestige) and those resulting from the

awareness and personal characteristics of the graduates. Such a distinction is used, among others, in the methodologies of the national evaluation studies of the National Centre for Research and Development (NCRD) and in the studies of foreign authors (compare: Donald, Ashleigh and Baruch, 2018).

However, in recent years, not only the prestige of the university but also the unit level of the acquired knowledge is increasingly exposed, expanding its scope in many fields of science by taking mandatory internships (Maliszewski and Solarczyk-Szwec, 2016; Zych, 2016; Griffin and Coelho, 2019). Improvement of practical skills is possible both through the implementation of the study program and mandatory internships, as well as through students' own activity during their studies, which usually results in increased opportunities in the labour market (Arak, 2013; Asikainen and Gijbels, 2017). There is no doubt that an increasing number of students are combining work with studies, especially in graduate studies. This is confirmed by the results of our study, further indicating that this trend is intensifying (Table 1).

Table 1. *Characteristics of study sample*

Specification	2017 (n=66)	2019 (n=86)
Gender		
female	89.4	75.6
male	10.6	24.4
Did you work for pay during your studies?		
yes	72.7	75.6
no	27.3	24.4
What type of work do you prefer?		
teamwork	36.4	27.9
individual	30.3	32.6
irrelevant	33.3	39.5
Would you be willing to work during college without pay as a volunteer?		
yes	30.3	24.4
no	30.3	46.5
don't know	39.4	29.1

Source: *Own study.*

In the course of analysis of the obtained results of the questionnaire research, it was found that at this stage of the career path for students there is no one preferred form of work (team or individual), moreover, the interest in undertaking work of a voluntary nature decreases. Making a more detailed analysis in the main part of the study, respondents were asked to evaluate (using a five-point Likert scale), 13 statements related to the perception of education and employment opportunities after graduation. These pertained to both external factors influencing the labour market, indirect evaluation of the chosen field of study (traits 6-"if I matriculated this year, I would choose a different field of study than my current one"; and 8-"the program of study should be focused more on practical knowledge than on theory"), and subjective self-selection of the surveyed students (Table 2).

Table 2. Statements describing the perception of conditions for successful entry into labour market

No.	Specification	2017 (n=66)			2019 (n=86)		
		Mean	Median	S.D	Mean	Median	S.D
1	A university degree guarantees getting an interesting job	3.24	4	1.33	3.03	4	1.44
2	Graduates from large cities have better chances on the labour market	2.48	2	1.43	2.58	2	1.44
3	Poland's accession to the EU has opened new professional perspectives for young people	4.15	4	0.98	4.30	5	0.88
4	Without acquaintances it is impossible to get a good job	3.03	3.5	1.12	2.67	2	1.31
5	The university should help the best graduates find their first job	4.08	4	1.06	3.67	4	1.28
6	If I were to pass Matura this year, I would choose a different field of study than the present	2.53	2	1.45	2.13	1.5	1.42
7	A graduate with professional experience and knowledge of foreign languages has no problems finding a job even during a recession	3.89	4	1.10	3.92	4	1.15
8	The curriculum should focus more on practical knowledge than on theory	4.48	5	0.88	4.36	5	0.89
9	I know what it takes to get my dream job and I consistently pursue it	3.27	4	1.18	3.45	4	1.10
10	When I think about my upcoming graduation, I get scared about my professional future	3.88	4	1.10	2.90	2.5	1.53
11	Vacations are for relaxing, not working	2.24	2	1.25	2.26	2	1.24
12	I cannot imagine life without work	3.74	4	1.19	3.77	4	1.36
13	It does not pay to get high marks at university, employers do not pay attention to the average grade	3.05	3	1.27	3.27	3.5	1.25

Source: Own study.

The value of indications for particular answers varied the most in the case of statement 2 ("graduates from big cities have better chances on the labour market"), 6 ("if I passed Matura this year, I would choose a different field of study than the present one") and 11 ("vacations are for rest, not for work"). The coefficient of variation for these statements exceeded 50%. The lowest variation was observed for statement 8 ("the curriculum should be focused on practical knowledge rather than theory") and statement 3 ("Poland's accession to the EU has opened up new career prospects for young people"). The calculated coefficient of variation amounted to 21% for these statements, which means less variation in responses, probably related to the fact that the respondents belong to the same, or very similar as far as functioning conditions are concerned, social group (i.e., the same year and major of study, etc.). It is worth

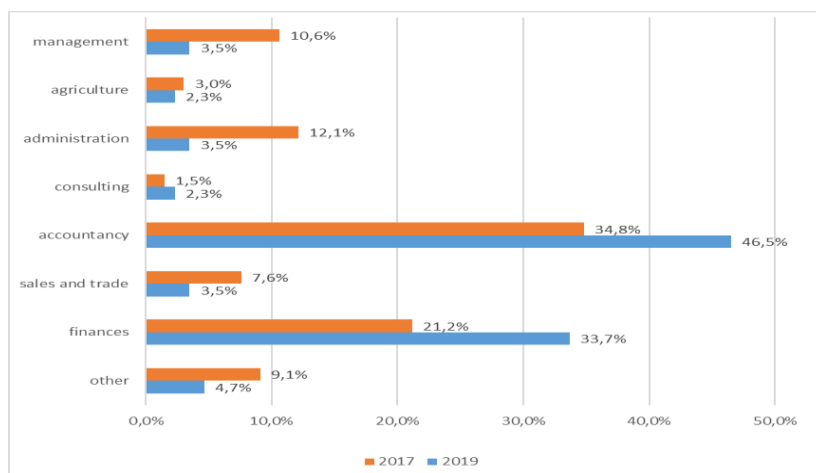
noting that in the 2019 survey, the highest variation was also noted for statement 10 - "when I think about the upcoming end of college, I am afraid for my professional future." This may be a symptomatic statement, especially given the tremendous increase in uncertainty of the labour market situation related to the changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and concerns about its possible return in the so-called next wave (Petrosky-Nadeau and Valletta, 2020; Aaronson *et al.*, 2020).

A detailed analysis of the collected factual material was conducted in order to determine whether the grades awarded differed significantly in the years studied. The Mann-Whitney U test and the Wald-Wolfowitz series test were applied. The results of these tests showed no statistically significant variation in either the mean or median value of the responses for most of the variables studied. Only in the case of statement 10 ("when I think about the approaching end of my studies, I fear for my professional future"), significant variation was found in the median ($p=0.000$) and mean ($p=0.023$) values. This means that the students believe that they are well prepared for their careers after graduation. In addition, according to the respondents, the study program should be more linked to the acquisition of practical knowledge, for example, by organizing internships and work placements for students (series test $p=0.009$). This is a result of the long-standing activities of the authorities of the FE PULS, who not only actively apply for more internship programs for their students, including those subsidized by EU operational programs or institutions such as NCRD, but also track the fate of graduates, among others, through the Polish Graduate tracking system (Kozera-Kowalska and Uglis 2018; ELA, 2021).

From the point of view of the effectiveness of the organization of the educational process, it is worth emphasizing that the surveyed students are satisfied with their choice of the field of study. This is confirmed by the low values (mean, median) for statement 6 ("if I were to take my baccalaureate this year, I would choose a different field of study than my current one"). An important, indirect indicator of the effectiveness of the organization of the educational process at the studied majors is also the statement that the diploma of the PULS Faculty of Economics guarantees getting an interesting job (statement 1) - high values of the mean and median.

In the further part of the study, the respondents were asked about the sector in which they would most like to take up a job. Considering the fields of study represented by the respondents (economics and finance and accounting), it is not surprising that accounting, finance and administration proved to be the preferred areas of employment (Figure 1). Administration and management came next, while agriculture, which is one of the leading segments of the food economy, was indicated by a very small, and declining, group of respondents (it was 3.0% of indications in 2017 and 2.3% in 2019, respectively). This trend can be worrying, especially from the point of view of the growing demand of agribusiness for young personnel with good education and professional preparation (Kozera-Kowalska and Uglis, 2021).

Figure 1. Preferred areas of future professional career



Source: Own study.

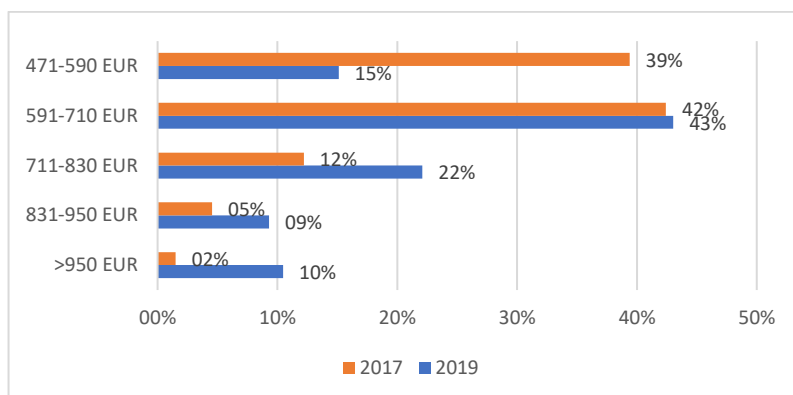
The further part of the research analysed the issues related to the importance of the organizational and legal form of the entity of future employment and by the amount of expected salary (net). It was assumed that there should be a relationship between these features. However, it turned out that these issues differed only to a small extent, i.e. in both studied years, work in a private company accounted for 25.8% and 26.7%, respectively, and work in a state-owned enterprise, preferably in the administration turned out to be crucial for 27.3% of the respondents in 2017, and only 15.1% in 2019. In addition, more than 30% of the surveyed students in 2019 planned to become self-employed, which meant an increase of more than 7% with respect to the first survey, i.e., in 2017.

Analysing the expectations of the net salary it was found that for the vast majority of the surveyed students its amount should be between 591 and 710 euros (Figure 2). (With the national average of 4,973.73 PLN gross (1192.74 euros³) in 2017 and 4918.17 PLN gross (1154.50 euros⁴) in 2019, respectively). The conducted analysis showed a significant differentiation of expectations of earnings in the studied years ($\chi^2=16.39$, $p=0.002$). Undoubtedly, the good economic situation in 2019 with a low level of unemployment favoured an increase in expectations in relation to the salary for the work performed. However, these expectations are reasonable, especially when compared with the data of the ELA system - regardless of the year of graduation, the earnings of graduates in the following years after graduation are increasing, and their growth is faster than the growth of wages in their places of residence (ELA, 2021).

Figure 2. *Expected net earnings*

³4.17 PLN – average euro exchange rate according to the National Bank of Poland on 29th December 2017.

⁴4.26 PLN – average euro exchange rate according to the National Bank of Poland on 31st December 2019.



Source: Own study.

The study further sought to determine what job search activities the surveyed students would undertake. The results indicate (Table 3) that the most common way of looking for a job was to analyse online advertisements. This was followed by direct contact with potential employers and completing internships and apprenticeships, even unpaid ones. The least popular activities turned out to be searching for a job through personal counselling companies and posting "I am looking for a job" advertisements.

Table 3. *Actions taken to get a job*

Specification	2017 (n=66)	2019 (n=86)
Methods of job search*		
Analysis of newspaper advertisements	33.3	7.0
Analysis of online advertisements	89.4	97.7
Placing a "job search" ad in the press	9.1	1.2
Submission of data to an online job board	34.8	27.9
Through family and friends	36.4	45.3
Through personal consulting companies	3.0	8.1
Direct contact with employers	31.8	54.7
Unpaid internships	33.3	18.6
Unpaid apprenticeships	45.5	32.6
Determinants of workplace selection*		
Good, high salary	78.8	76.7
Good possibilities for advancement	59.1	38.4
Job where you feel you can do something	57.6	29.1
Pleasant atmosphere at work	71.2	53.5
Opportunity to pursue own interests and passions	45.5	25.6
Job security, no threat of dismissal	48.5	18.6
Prestige of the job	21.2	7.0
Many contacts with people	19.7	8.1
Irregular working hours	12.1	9.3
Lack of tension at work	53.0	24.4

Note: * up to 3 answers could be provided.

Source: Own study.

From the point of view of employment opportunities, it was important to determine the determinants of the choice of a job offer. Respondents were most likely to indicate good and high salaries (76.7%) and a pleasant atmosphere at work (53.5). Also important to respondents was the opportunity for advancement (59.1% in 2017 and 38.4% in 2019) and the feeling that the job is important or socially useful (57.6% and 29.1%). In contrast, for both years of the survey, the least important factors in choosing a place to work were found to be the prestige of the job, lots of contact with people, and irregular working hours.

As it seems, the surveyed students are aware that in many companies, non-standard working hours are required, which, given the habits of student life, may be a deterrent to taking up employment in an organization that uses this system of work.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The changing job market contributes to a re-evaluation of the students' view of the role that education, or more precisely a university diploma with a specific profile, plays in the process of seeking employment. They are also aware of the importance of an internship or apprenticeship for an employer. These regularities also apply to students of the Faculty of Economics of the PULS, studying in two fields of study i.e. economics and finance and accounting. The conducted research indicated that students of both these faculties know the requirements of the modern labour market, which is manifested, *inter alia*, by combining the master's studies with not only the internship or practice offered by the Faculty but also with the undertaken professional work. This attitude creates a competitive advantage over peers applying for similar positions on the job market. Additionally, students of the Faculty are aware of the problems and challenges they will face after graduation, so they consciously apply for internships and apprenticeships that are of interest to them.

These observations are very important, especially since, according to the CSO, in the fourth quarter of 2019, i.e. in the quarter preceding the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the beginning of the labour market crisis, more than 1.2 million young people were employed in Poland. At the same time, in the last quarter of 2020, the number of employed "young people" decreased to 917 thousand (PARP, 2020). This means that the pandemic has eliminated almost 400 thousand graduates of various schools, including students, from the labour market. Dropping out of the labour market, young people lost the opportunity to gain professional experience already at the beginning of their career path. Some of them did not even have time to try to enter this market. According to Eurostat data, in the group of the so-called young (15-24 years) the number of economically active people in Poland has decreased by almost 170 thousand. This is the largest decline in the EU (Szewczyk, 2020).

In conclusion, it should be stated that the policy pursued by the Faculty of Economics of PULS in the field of theoretical education combined with internships and professional practice offered to students while still in the course of their education,

which is confirmed by the students themselves (respondents would again choose the same course of study at the same university and the belief that the diploma of the Faculty of Economics of PULS guarantees them to get an interesting job).

However, the survey also indicated a still present lack of knowledge or creativity among students on the ways and means of seeking employment (the dominant way of seeking employment was still the analysis of Internet advertisements, much less evaluated reaching out with an offer directly to the employer, or using the intermediation of personnel consulting companies). This is an important signal for the FE of the need to supplement the education also in this area. Nevertheless, the students-graduates surveyed are both aware of the wage differentials on the market and have a well-established sense of self-esteem, which determines both their relatively high salary expectations and additional criteria for future work (including a pleasant atmosphere at work, the possibility of promotion or a feeling that the chosen job is important or socially useful).

However, regardless of the positive attitudes towards entering the labour market successfully, it should be emphasized that graduates of both the first and second degree programs of 2019, and therefore also the respondents, were in a situation of increased risk of unemployment due to COVID-19, and their entry into the poverty market was more difficult than in the case of their older colleagues.

5. Research Limitation and Suggestions for Future Studies

This study has some limitations. The selection of respondents for the study included only students from two faculties conducted by the Poznan University of Life Sciences. Therefore, the extension of the sample in future research seems justified, further research is needed among students of different faculties and universities from Poland and other European Union countries and comparison of these results.

In addition, in future research it would be worthwhile to pay attention to factors that may negatively affect the entry of graduates into the labour market, such as the effects of global lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of distance learning at universities.

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