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ARTICLES



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HIGHER EDUCATION IN POLAND: THE MEANING OF THE HUMAN FACTOR

Educational boom in Poland begun formally along with the liberalization of the act on higher education, which act has changed the rules of functioning of higher education institution (HEI) in Poland in an irreversible and revolutionary manner. The practical monopoly of the state for the third level education has been overcome, as a result of which, numerous private schools appeared, as well as commercial – fee-paying studies.

The system reformation commenced in June 1989 disturbed the foundations of the flexible structure of higher education. The separation from the typical for socialist economy central control, as well as resigning from ideologically motivated state monopoly of production means ownership, resulted in an atmosphere friendly to introducing radical change. The liberalization had its ideological sources. For about half a century of communist system, academic society constituted the core of the strongest opposition towards the policy of the authorities, which resolved to devoid HEI and universities especially, of their independence. The system change led to hasty re-endowment of numerous rights to universities as a kind of gratitude for the active involvement of academic circles into reinstating democracy after years of socialist power. However, this does not change the basic fact that the transformation was almost revolutionary in character as far as time and scope of the change is concerned; for the reason that academic sphere – due to its political incorrectness – was especially supervised by state authorities. The functioning of higher education institutions, predominantly in the area of didactics, was on a censored position in the communist system. As a result, they needed strict and detailed control¹. Consequently, the abolition of numerous bureaucratic barriers shook the flexible structure of university education. A new legal frame was introduced by an *Act on Higher Education* in 1990, which, among others, reestablished the right to run HEI to private entities, while rectors were given wider compe-

¹ Comp. D. Antonowicz, *Uniwersytet przyszłości*, Warszawa 2005.

tence as to managing HEI. The disappearance of strict admission limits made it possible to continue education for many those who had been unable to take part in the educational system on this level, and the increase in independence resulted in them being separate legal entities.

It is worth stating in this context that it were the efforts to bring higher education autonomy and legal independence that begun in an unpremeditated and then unpredictable manner a true educational downpour that basically until today has been a symbol of the success of Polish social-economical change.

1. Social contexts

Polish educational transformation have as much been a result of specific global tendencies as of numerous Polish peculiarities. Consequently, to understand them not only cartographic knowledge that describes the character of change is required, but also (perhaps predominantly) the ability to decipher correctly their essence and direction by placing them in the wide current of global change. In this aspect, the studies of Daniel Bell² and Ulrich Beck³, which connect educational revolution with the formation of a new kind of society, are unusually useful.

The modernizing reforms initiated by the government of Tadeusz Mazowiecki aimed at radical liberalization of economy, reconstruction of the rules of the state functioning, yet probably, unintentionally, they meant also turning towards the model of **post-industrial society** described by Bell in his outstanding work *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*. Three main factors constituted the engine of these actions (1) marketing economy – bringing back the rules of supply and demand in place of central control; (2) stepping out of economic isolationism and joining open trade (meaning free competition, also international) on the European Continent. The third (3) factor, which was a sort of derivative of the two above, and which constituted enormous power on its own was technological progress, which came with modernization of economy. Thus, it can be stated that the introduction of free market rules, as well as entering international trade contributed to massive technological progress, which needed new competence and skill.

Polish society of the nineties is characterized by a deep change in the structure of employment – the effect of the fall of numerous state companies, the disappearance of the working class masses for large industries, as well as the growing importance of economy based on knowledge, which arose the hunger of education, becoming the turning wheel of Polish higher education. Its dynamic development was directly linked with the growth of practical value of knowledge, becoming the foundation of post-in-

² D. Bell, *The coming of post-industrial society*, Londyn 1974.

³ U. Beck, *Spółeczeństwo ryzyka*, Warszawa 2002.

dustrial society. Bell emphasizes the central meaning of theoretical knowledge as *an axis around which new technology, economic growth and social satisfaction are organized*(ed.) In the place of the late production of material goods, which in Polish conditions was the predominance of heavy industry, mining industry and power-consuming industry, the fundamental role is endowed to the production of services. A new “intellectual” technology develops, transforming the professional structure. A new sector of professional services quickly comes into being, one in the spheres of education, social care, which is symbolized, in the area of this work’s interest, by an enormous number of private schools, both universities and others for high school graduates.

A new model of society, which has appeared in Poland as a result of social-economic transformation, is a consequence of the structural economic change. It rightly predicted the **turning back from collective (substantially class-like) understanding of society towards liberal individualism**, from a shapeless homogeneous mass to an internally differentiated group of consumers. Although the modernization processes studied by Bell are primarily concentrated on the sphere of production and consumption, they unavoidably also concern other areas of social life. However, to analyze them – especially referring to Polish educational change – the theory of a German sociologist Ulrich Beck will be more adequate. The modern model of society is defined by him as a **society of risk** which grows on the ground of the processes of liberalization and globalisation, whose scope exceeds by far the economic sphere. Risk is an effect of liberating from traditional bonds and sources of earning one’s living, due to which it is individualized and unevenly distributed(ed.) In an post-industrial society, individual freedom, wide independence is paid for by a high degree of insecurity, which depending on the owned supplies (material, social, cultural) can be quite freely shaped(ed.) Beck claims that everyone to some extent is prone to the risk (e.g. Ecological), yet in numerous spheres its level depends on individual conduct. A part of it is the situation on the job market, where one of the most common and effective methods of reducing the risk is education, since the threat of losing work is diversely proportionate to the level of education. According to the German sociologist, it is the collection of information gained in the process of education that lessens the threat of unemployment.

Meritocracy lays at the source of educational revolution, where the sense of improving skills and developing professional qualifications are considered as a kind of long term investment into individual development. The dogma of uselessness of university education and knowledge, widely spread at the times of real socialism, crumbled together with the era the creation of which it was, and studies themselves ceased to be a waiting room for people without any idea for adult life and have largely become an investment into professional career. That was an effect of the social-economic transformation because in the countries of real socialism higher education was not the determiner of professional career. It must be added that this thesis does not concern equally all social-professional groups and it can be stated that higher education made it easier to gain prestige and power. However, in the instrumental meaning, the value of

knowledge was considerably depreciated by the lack of visible correlation between the level of education and earnings⁴. The situation changed with the coming of new (market and democratic) order, which has been confirmed in the analyses conducted by Jan Rutkowski⁵ which undoubtedly indicate that the earnings have become a positive function of education and an increase in the level of benefit from investments in education has increased. In other words, it can be sensed that education has become profitable.

Simultaneously, not only has higher education become an important indicator of the position in social structure, but it is a highly praised ascriptive value. It has caused an increase in educational aspirations and a rapid thirst for knowledge, which in turn could be fulfilled due to the appearance of free market in higher education. While Włodzimierz Wesołowski⁶ in the seventies formed a hypothesis relating to the decomposing of the features of social position: income, education, power and prestige, the turn of the nineties brought noticeable change and now a new recombination of the features is discussed as visible⁷.

In the early stage of the social-cultural change higher education gave almost certainty of employment, which constituted a valuable guarantee in the uncertain time of transformation. Educational capital was treated as a positive function of career and provided that it was a result of ambitious and gifted individuals, it proved people's competence and usefulness on the job market. In the course of time, education has become credential⁸, "a currency" with which it was possible to achieve a work place. Until middle nineties it was a certain and hard currency, basically unforgeable (there were no entities that issued academic certificates to people without the necessary competence), nevertheless, with the massive access to university education and its diversification, there was an inflation and differentiation of educational credentials. Essentially, it has not changed the fact that Poles believed that in economy there is time for knowledge and skill, as well as the recognition of the influence of the level of education on the professional position and income, and in equalizing the investment in personal education and development with an instance of rationality on the job market.

The system of government change turned "upside down" the rules of economy, but also, perhaps predominantly, they were a revolution in a social meaning, which was realized in turning from uniform, collective, static and egalitarian society to a considerably varied, individualized, dynamic in its structure model of postmodern society. The development of Polish university education is a part of this current in supporting the

⁴ Comp. I. Białecki, *Dwa cele kształcenia*, "Nauka i Szkolnictwo Wyższe" 2000, pp. 34–40.

⁵ J. Rutkowski, *Wykształcenie a perspektywy na rynku pracy*, "Nauka i Szkolnictwo Wyższe" 1996, pp. 7–88.

⁶ Comp. W. Wesołowski, *Teoria, badania, praktyka. Z problematyki struktury klasowej*, Warszawa 1975.

⁷ H. Domański, *Spółczesność klasy średniej*, Warszawa 1994.

⁸ Comp. R. Collins, *The Credential Society*, New York 1979.

structural modernization of Polish economy and adding to the creation of risk society. They have become the foundation of educational boom, which Bronisław Misztal⁹ does not hesitate to call a Polish phenomenon in university education.

The dynamic development of higher education has become a representation of Polish transformation, however in the following analyses we will endeavour to show that the phenomenon was not an effect of planned, organized and coherent political action, to the contrary, it constituted a quite a hard to predict effect of parallel in time, though independent, social and economic processes, in which the dominant role belonged to (unpredictable) human factor.

2. The quantitative dimension of educational boom

It can be said that Polish solutions did not differ much from the direction of change in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe¹⁰. In most countries the autonomy of university schools was reconstituted, but only in Poland the increase in the number of both HEI and students is so noticeable. Even though specific legal solutions are difficult to compare, the direction of change in most post communist countries was very similar, the factor that makes Polish university education unique is the sudden **growth of educational aspirations**, as well as the uncommon on such a scale **increase in the number of private higher education institutions (HEI)**.

About the dynamic growth of the need for university education – apart from the aforementioned meritocratic factors – decided the rapidly awoken aspirations of following years of students entering university age, as well as of people a little older, professionally active, who in that way wanted to strengthen their position or enlarge their chance for promotion. These tendencies were strengthened by the structural reform of the schooling system, as a result of which the net of secondary comprehensive schools has been developed, at the expense of lower level secondary schools – vocational schools (the results of this decision are visible today on the job market in the form of lack of specialists in many trades). Secondary comprehensive schools do not essentially prepare for any specific profession – namely, they provide general education on a level higher than upper primary school, preparing for university studies. It can be claimed that a natural route after secondary school is a university school. The development of the secondary comprehensive schools net has substantially contributed to the uprise of educational aspirations, though, as far as effectiveness of functioning is concerned, they can differ considerably. The above has been confirmed by empirical study conducted

⁹ Comp. *Prywatyzacja szkolnictwa wyższego*, (ed.) B. Misztal, Warszawa 2000.

¹⁰ Comp. *Real-time systems. Reflections on Higher education in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia*, (eds.) J. File and L. Goedegebuurenia, Brno–Twente 2003.

by Piotr Mikiewicz and Jarosław Domalewski¹¹, which suggest that we are faced with a deep differentiation of secondary comprehensive education: on the one hand there are the “old” grammar schools, often elitist (their graduates receive very good marks from “matura” school-leaving exam, but the social structure of the students is not egalitarian), on the other hand there are weak, usually newly created comprehensive schools, yet more egalitarian as far as social structure of the students is concerned. Of course, youth that is positively selected in their competence (yet also in possession of better social status) is admitted to prestigious universities and specializations. Others are mostly represented in private schools, on part-time studies.

A huge **social demand** for education could not be satisfied sufficiently through the development of traditional forms – full-time studies, financed by the state budget – for this reason appears the necessity to use new (develop the so far marginalized) forms of education. It refers predominantly to private HEI, which are directed almost entirely to draw profits from the fees paid by all students, and this decides about their economic condition – lack of financial fluctuation leads to bankruptcy. A large share in the development of educational opportunities belongs also to public schools, which gained the possibility to perform fee-paying part-time studies, which considerably strengthens their budgets.

The creation of a more flexible system of third level education, as well as opening part-time studies (both in public and private schools) evoked a ponderous increase in the number of students. It is enough to state that before 1990 it was mostly the employees of educational sector that made use of the possibility to study externally, thus completing their level of education. Consequently, the offer of studies was largely limited to “teacher” subjects, and the number of students was very low. The liberalisation of the legal frame enabled HEI to step away from that scheme, and the rapidly growing demand for knowledge and skill could finally find its vent. The above happened in spite of the strong ties with egalitarian principles, substantiated in the era of People’s Poland, finding expression in the tradition of free access to higher education. A reflection of this is the absurd statement in the Constitution of Polish Republic saying that “education in public schools is free” (art. 70 p. 2), and following, allowing the possibility of providing some educational services for tuition. Due to this constitutional ambivalence, it is possible to preserve both “free” studies and fee-paying forms of education.

The rate of scholarisation is an empirical indicator of this social demand that illustrates the dynamics of its growth. As far as university education is concerned, it is essential to define which percentage of people at university age, i.e. 19–24 years old, actually studies. The analysis of such defined net scholarization indicator points at a distinct and constant in time growth. While in the academic year 1990/91 it was 9,8%,

¹¹ Por. J. Domalewski, P. Mikiewicz, *Młodzież w zreformowanym systemie szkolnym*, Toruń–Warszawa 2004.

five years later 17,2%, and in the year 2000/01 – 30,6%. Recently the indicator has reached 38%, which suggests that more than every third young person at the age of 19–24 is endowed with the status of a student. The profound growth of the net scholarization rate took place already in the initial five years of III Polish Republic, yet the most noticeable change was observed in the following comparative period of time, when the indicator grew by over 13 percents. In the whole analyzed period of time, i.e. In the years 1990–2005 we have witnessed an almost quadruple growth.

The gross scholarization indicator has a similarly extensive diagnostic value. This indicator comes into being as a result of comparison between the total number of students, irrespective of their age, and the size of population at the age of university students (19–24 years old). At the starting point (year 1990/91) the rate of such understood scholarization was 12,9%, five years later 22,3%, after a decade of government system transformation to reach 40,7%. The most recent analyses show that gross scholarization reaches up to 48,9%. Also in that case the greatest dynamics was observed in the years 1995–2000. For the recent few years, the increase of this factor has also been observed, yet the change itself is considerably slower. Throughout the whole studied period of time the gross scholarization rose three and a half times. This is obviously a process rare in other countries, which have developed and built their market economy naturally. Nowadays, with the given rate of gross scholarization, we are comparative to the average numbers for rich countries – the members

of OECD¹². The modern educational offer of Polish universities amounts annually to nearly 500 thousand vacancies at freshman year. Theoretically, everyone willing to study has the possibility to do that. In reality, we have prestigious universities and subjects, where for one vacancy there are even more than ten applicants, and HEI that admit everyone who wants to study and pay for it. In the year 2006, a little over 380 thousand people graduated from secondary schools, and it is them that constitute the base of university candidates (of course not everyone).

The dynamic growth of the number of students was a direct effect of the increase in **the amount of private university schools**. Their number grew systematically since 1991. In the academic year 1991/1992 there were only 10, while ten years later (2001/2002) already 377, and nowadays over 445¹³. The foundation of new university level schools meant above all the growth of the places at the third level of education, widening educational opportunities, yet it did not enlarge (widen) the educational offer. By far the largest number of private schools was created entirely without any infrastructure, taking advantage of the possibility to rent rooms in companies or secondary schools, or even in primary schools or kindergartens. Infrastructural lacks result from the nature of the “privatization” process of higher education in Poland, in which con-

¹² *Rocznik Statystyki Międzynarodowej*, Główny Urząd Statystyczny, Warszawa 2000, pp. 152–155.

¹³ *Szkoły wyższe i ich finanse*, Główny Urząd Statystyczny, Warszawa 2001.

trary to a comparative process in other sectors of economy, where it was linked with (a) taking over of Polish institutions by foreign capital, (b) bankruptcy of the so far existing companies, it did not happen. On the contrary, the creation of private higher education was not a result of the influx of foreign capital (perhaps with the exception of *know-how* brought by people working at prestigious foreign universities), but rather of the birth of Polish capitalism without capital. This genetic obstacle determined the direction of HEI development. Infrastructural lacks and – typical for the initial part of capitalism, characterized by instability – the need to gain a fast refund of the ventured investments caused that the nineties witnessed the bloom of the specializations mostly not requiring extensive financial support – mainly humanistic studies (administration, sociology, psychology, pedagogy, and especially management and marketing, which in the nineties were almost the key to career in the private sector). The above is confirmed in the report, which states that the biggest number of students chose marketing and management (218 thousand), pedagogy (151 thousand), economy (118 thousand) and administration (93 thousand)¹⁴.

A similar phenomenon could be observed in public HEI, which had the infrastructure, yet organizing classes at money-consuming disciplines was expensive, strictly limited by the number of available posts. Meanwhile, to law or economy studies it was possible to admit an almost limitless number of candidates for the first year (of part-time studies), since there were no serious infrastructural limits. For the lecturers there was no difference whether they spoke to a thousand listeners, and the difference in income was substantial. Classes carried out in small groups – workshops, conversations – were limited, because the remunerativeness of the departments based only on lectures was by far greater, thus for a long time there was no economic explanation to widen the educational offer. Even more so, that the introduction of free market to Polish economy caused an enormous demand for easily applied knowledge, mostly economic, not abstract one that was treated as not suitable for the needs of new reality.

3. Side effects

Spontaneous social processes are characterized by an enormous animation and hardly predictable consequences. The lack of central control constitutes an undoubted asset, arises human initiative and is a limitless source of innovation, yet the unpredictable direction and pace of the changes can simultaneously pose a threat of insufficient control as a result of which, unpredictable side effects are revealed. Similarly to the sphere of politics, where the first day of freedom (after the rule of dictatorship) often results in anarchism in social life, a “stall market” form of academic capitalism was the effect

¹⁴ Ministerstwo Edukacji Narodowej i Sportu, *Analiza liczby studentów w roku akademickim 2003/2004*, Warszawa 2004.

of the setting free of higher education from the mechanisms of state control, which led to a drastic fall in the level of education. The size of the educational boom surprised everyone, this is why practically throughout the nineties, neither the government nor the academic society was prepared for providing at least decent standards of education quality.

One of the best quantitative indicators that illustrate the quality change in university education is the relation of the number of students to the number of academic staff. According to public statistics¹⁵ for the year 2005/2006 Poland has one of the highest average numbers of the number of students per one academic teacher and today it is 22,3. It is worth stating that in the year 1991/2 the average number of students per one academic teacher was only 6,6, which means that during the recent fifteen years of transformation we have had an almost tripple and a half increase. Nowadays, a higher indicator is only in the former Yugoslavia republics: Croatia 25,8 and Macedonia 23,5, to compare with a neighbour of Poland, Slovakia, only twelve students count per one academic teacher.

It is worth emphasizing that the liberalization of law on higher education introduced in 1990, apart from the aforementioned political aspect, had also a financial dimension. From the beginning of system change, the financing of budget institutions, a part of which are HEI has been the gravest problem. The budget of Poland was not able to provide decent current financing of public HEI, not to mention the investments into structural development or academic lecturers. What is even worse, the state was unable to fulfill the basic financial expectations of academic society. From the beginning of the nineties the money for higher education vary at about 0,85% of the annual country income and it tends to be constant with elements of occasional fall¹⁶. It is very little, even in comparison to the developing countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Given the situation, the only solution was to enable public HEI to search for funds on the free market (mostly in the form of educational service), and for the scientists to find employment in more than one educational institution. Since there was a demand for the service, and academics were ready to work, there was no reason to limit this phenomenon. For this reason, in the beginning it was allowed to admit an almost limitless number of people to private HEI and to extramural studies in public universities. By these means, animated processes were unleashed, the dynamics of which exceeded the boldest expectations of the plan makers, becoming a symbol of Polish change, the control of which was becoming a more serious problem for authorities.

¹⁵ Collective statistics published by *European Centre for Higher Education* (UNESCO-CEPES) in Bucharest.

¹⁶ *Szkoły wyższe i ich finanse*, Główny Urząd Statystyczny, Warszawa 2006, pp. 256–270.

There was no legal option for the authorities to control if the educational process is performed in accordance with the regulations of the act. The act of 1990 was liberal to such an extent that even the Supreme Control Chamber was unable to prevent numerous pathologies. A meaningful illustration of the fact is a nearly forty-page report, published by the Supreme Control Chamber in 2000, about *The Functioning of the Country Control over Private Higher Education Institutions and Higher Vocational Schools*. One of the conclusions from the control directly claims that the Minister of Education (now the Minister of Science and Higher Education) lacks the necessary rights to perform efficient control over the current performance of private HEI, especially as to the quality of teaching, obeying the rules of legal acts, statutory resolutions and the conditions of granted permissions. The situation is mostly caused by the statements in the act on higher education, which enable the minister to demand only information about the functioning of private schools. On the other hand, according to the Supreme Chamber of Control, even if deficiency was revealed, the Ministry of Education limits itself only to inform the higher about the discovered violations of the existing regulations, without forming any charges that would constitute a basis to use the sanctions predicted in the law. The creation of the National Accreditation Commission¹⁷ in 2000 was an endeavor to solve the problems with the instances of pathology in higher education and unfair competition on the side of many educational institutions extensively described in the press. The commission was to care for the standards in higher education. The subject of control is the infrastructure, academic teachers, as well as educational offer. The commission can also grant conditional accreditation (recommending fast correction of dysfunctions) and opt for the closing of a given school or department. It is a tool which constitutes a part of business connections, and political affiliations become meaningful¹⁸.

4. The pressure of a demographic factor

A factor which is very strong and certain for the statement of future condition, which determines the situation in higher education is the **demographic potential**. The border values of the fact how many people used to study, currently studies or can study in the nearly twenty years to come are determined by live births. Natural deaths, registered in the youngest stages of a human life are clearly defined (assuming lack of huge disasters that would change the situation). Similarly fictional is the assumption that the situation on the educational market can be valiantly changed by the influx of students from abroad, or by Poles going abroad to study.

¹⁷ Ustawa z dnia 20 lipca 2001 r. o zmianie ustawy o szkolnictwie wyższym, ustawy o wyższych szkołach zawodowych oraz o zmianie niektórych innych ustaw powołała Państwową Komisję Akredytacyjną jako ustawowy organ działający na rzecz jakości kształcenia, określając jej zadania oraz tryb pracy.

¹⁸ Comp. Z. Kwiecieński, *Dryfować i ludzić. Polska „strategia” edukacyjna*, “Nauka” 2006, no. 1, pp. 27–45.

Analysing the demographic factor over at least one last century, thus from an inter-generation point of view, it can be noticed that the years of demographic explosion are intertwined with low demographic figures. The general rule that a demographic explosion that enters the reproductive age determines a higher birth rate (e.g. over 760 thousand in 1950), while the opposite results in years much less numerous in 1970 less than 550 thousand) was distracted by events such as world wars (loss in people's lives, emigration, as well as postponed ambitions and aspirations). In last more than ten years, civilization change is such important paradigm. A distinct fall in the number of children has been registered in Poland for almost twenty years. Earlier, a similar phenomenon was observed in the developed countries of the West, and its effect is depopulation and elderly society. It is difficult to define one dominant cause of the state of the matter – a fight for a position on the job market, economic reasons, responsibility for a child or conformism, et. – still, it is possible to discuss a coexistence of various conditioning.

However, remaining in the sphere of facts, it must be noted that when at the beginning of III Polish Republic almost 550 thousand children were born (1990), lately (2005) only 350 thousand. In absolute numbers there are as many as 200 thousand births less, and in relative numbers it is an almost 40% fall. The tendency has been – so far – constant and evident: each year for nearly two decades, more than ten thousand fewer Poles are born. The current fertility factor – 1,3 births per a woman – in no way can guarantee a simple replacement of generations. It is obvious that the trend cannot be never ending. Though, it is worth noticing that soon other years of demographic low numbers will start entering reproductive age, which even with help of noticeable increase in the birth factor will still generate the fall of birthrate.

The outcomes of the situation are clearly experienced by both the producers of food, clothes and other accessories for children, and bookstore owners (school books, notebooks, etc.). Obvious changes in education also result from the above. Lately, about 4,3 thousand kindergartens have been closed, which is more than every third one (mostly in the countryside). The spreading low numbers of birth has evoked similar change in elementary education – more than 5 thousand schools have been closed, which is every fourth school, and especially visible it is also in the countryside. A simple consequence of the political decisions that change the schooling net and creating obstacles on the path to education because of the place of living must be an increase in social inequality as to access to university education. Taking the decisions into consideration, economic factor must be also borne in mind – the expense of municipalities, as well as structural change in education – the creation of lower-secondary schools.

Another, very disturbing outcome of the registered low number of births is the fact of Polish society becoming older. For a few years, natural birthrate – measured by the difference between the number of births and deaths – has been below zero, and the value of the rate has been growing in years. Thus, the whole pension system has been harshly tried, moreover, it breeds anxiety about the future of the country. The anxiety

has been even stronger due to the mass emigration of young people, and their basic reasons: to look for work and to study could suggest the so called drainage of brain. The latest wave of emigration is estimated (a “dark number” hidden there) even up to 2 million. Effective pro-family policy could be a realistic impulse to change the existing situation, and first of all, creating chances to fulfill life ambitions in Poland.

5. Social aspirations to education at university level

The afore discussed demographic factor, understood as the numbers of respective years, cannot find its direct reflection in the form of demand for higher education. The key meaning belongs here to **the level of social efforts to education**. In empirical projects, they are operationalized in the form of aspirations, or specific plans. The latter refer usually to the youth that is in the position of obligatory choice, i.e. To the students of last years of secondary schools who must take life decisions: university – other school after secondary one – work. It is understandable that only a part of the population faces the dilemma of choosing the direction of studies – the ones that are granted a “matura” school-leaving exam certificate.

Treating **education as a value** determines the level of social educational aspiration. Why do more and more people spend more and more years of their lives at school? One can point here both at the needs of the job market, at the widely understood consumption, and at different quality of life of people better and worse educated. One cannot also underestimate the autotelling benefits of higher education for an individual, and general social merits for the development of a specific nation or country. It is often the costs that decide if it is worth it to pay for our own / child’s long and good education: to what extent is it an economically profitable investment? However, it is beyond any doubt that the most developed countries in the world today are characterized by the best educated society. Their developing potential attracts entrepreneurs and creative people, thus explicit brain drainage. The society of knowledge, presently built, strengthens the tendency.

Numerous factors influence educational decisions: from genetic (e.g. talent), through social (habitus), to the activity of a man himself (hard working, etc.). They create a group of conditions favourable to achievement or serving early exclusion. As a result, in the studies, the following theories are present: meritocratic (do the best win?), group interests (the meaning of protection, even corruption?), as well as egalitarian theory (how big is the scale of social inequality in the access to university education?) or random (the meaning of coincidence?)¹⁹.

¹⁹ Comp. R. Borowicz, *Nierówności społeczne w dostępie do wykształcenia. Casus Suwalszczyzny*, Olecko 2000.

The issues connected with aspirations, or specific educational plans of people, especially youth, belong to quite well recognized. As an illustration, the classical today works of Józef Chałasiński can be referred to, as well as of Stanisław Kowalski, or Jan Szczepański, as well as of the active today researchers of the issues, Ireneusz Białycki or Zbigniew Kwieciński.

The demand of Polish society for university education analyzed on a historical time axis systematically grows, which is caused by the widely understood job market, consumption, strengthened by popularizing next steps of educational ladder. Still in the middle of the twentieth century, illiteracy was the battlefield; later, it was a problem to continue education after graduating from primary school, then popularizing secondary school; temporarily – which the rate of scholarisation proves – we can talk about mass education on the third level.

Analyzing data from the past, as well as quite recent information, one could try to decide which percentage of population will want to study. On the one hand, the possible failure of the extrapolation-of-the-late-trends method cannot be forgotten, on the other hand, the possible completion and inflation of university education. The usage of meritocratic criteria suggests that more than ten percent of population is eliminated from the game by inborn deficiencies – handicap; others – by low acquired competence – functional illiteracy. Just as important in the game is the actual social inequality in the access to higher education. In case of beneficial social status (parents graduated from HEI, are in a job requiring such education, primary socialization took place in a big city) we face mass studying, and the worse position syndrome (place of living in the countryside, low social status of the family of origin) results in the aforementioned exclusion. Educational institutions of the third level are only to strengthen the scheme. A good school differs from a weak one – even if they are one name schools – in that the first collects youth of higher learning abilities, what is more, positively selected in the social sense, where the ambition for higher education is common, while in the second there are people of lower learning abilities, but their social structure is more egalitarian, yet only few think about university.

Thus, a natural effect of selection in education is that a smaller and smaller percentage of positively selected youth, stronger motivated in their need to study, goes to highest steps of educational ladder. Elitism is a kind of spontaneous result of the processes, as far as their content is concerned. An example of social inequality in the access to higher education can be the involvement of village youth. In the structure of students, village youth is represented by 20–21%, while in the countryside there are about 38% of Poles. This is, of course, an average indicator, and together with the departments where they are evidently underrepresented – comprise to not more than 5% of all the students (e.g. law), there are such that this structure is egalitarian in character (e.g. theology). More or less elitist are not only particular departments, but whole universities, as well. Paralleled, quite audible is the phenomenon of polarization: the more elitist the structure of students, the greater the likelihood that we have to do

with a good university; while egalitarian structure of youth is associated with somewhat provincial level.

The empirical experiences so far indicate univocally that wanting to keep the existing educational standards it is difficult to cross the net scholarisation rate at the level of 50–55%. It is impossible to think then about a decisive increase in the gross scholarisation rate, if only for the reason that older people that would like to rise their level of education might have already done so. The visible before “educational overhang” noticeably decreases. The last common census (conducted in 2002) showed that 10% of adult Poles are in the possession of a higher education certificate. It is worth also noticing that over 57% citizens have been through a short course of education – at most a vocational school – and for this reason alone they cannot apply to HEI. Best educated are of course young people (at the age of 25–29) who could fully use the general offer. Out of the group, 20,6% has graduated from HEI, at the same time, though, as many as 41% have not graduated even from secondary school²⁰, which is important for defining the real rate of scholarization. It is obvious that a part of them can still receive a “matura” graduation certificate and commence studies in a later period. Just as apparent is the fact that not everyone with “matura” exam certificate wants to study (a given percentage does not learn any longer, others go to schools for secondary education graduates, the net of which is well developed).

Thus, taking the above factors into consideration, quite a high rate of scholarization can be assumed, namely 60%. Comparing its level to the state of today it can be seen that the difference between indicators is large, and thus the path to cross is wide.

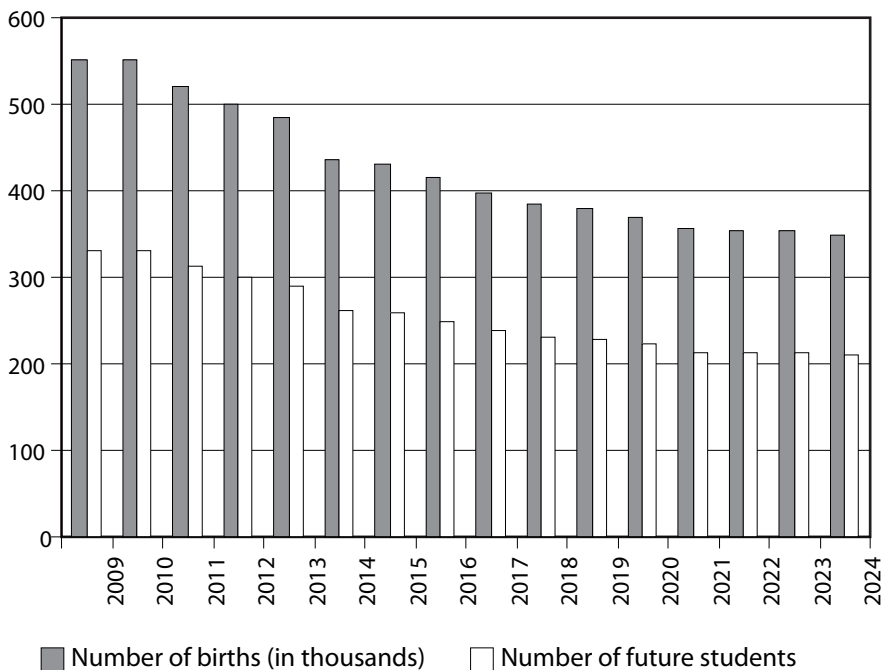
6. Forecast for the future

Thus, trying to predict the future of university education from the perspective of human factor, two assumptions can be made. The first one is the demographic potential of Polish society. This factor is unusually strong in the middle-term plan, i.e. Of the next two decades, since it is difficult to expect any change here. A systematic fall in the number of births in recent years is a fact, the results of which – though postponed in time – university education begins to feel today. In a few years we will be witnesses of a situation in which the numbers of the whole demographic year will be smaller than temporary educational offer (to remind the reader – it is 500 thousand vacancies for the first year of study).

The second factor is the real scholarization rate. The assumption as to its level adopted by us is definitely questionable. The factors of the meritocratic, social, or economic nature given above seem to indicate that the level 60% is not only a distant aim, but dif-

²⁰ National Census, *The social structure of population*, Warszawa 2002.

ficult to reach, as well. Can this rate be even higher? (in the academic year 2005/06 the scholarization rate of this year's "matura" exam graduates circulated around 50%.



Drawing 1: Personal source

Taking into consideration only the two factors, it can be noticed that in higher education – only for the sake of human potential – revolutionary change is necessary. In the recent years it can be said – on national scale – about a specific balance between social demand for education and the supply of places at higher education institutions, since everyone willing can study. Similarly, the recent relations between the public and private sectors, more specifically between daily studies (financed mostly from the public means) and extramural (commercial) can be defined as decent, even partner-like. The outstanding growth of demand caused that there was enough of “the huge cake” for everyone. The net of HEI has grown to a monstrous size – today there are 430 university schools, and the number of youth at HEI is approximately (we do not know that exactly) 1,9 million, or fee-paying forms of study – concerns about 60% of everyone. Nowadays, the fight for a student – more specifically for their money – begins to be increasingly aggressive, since there are many institutions and the proverbial cake in form of real candidates (not virtual) – each person can apply to a few departments) starts to become smaller. In the year 2005/06 already the number of people who begun

university study at first year was a little smaller than before, and the loss – interestingly – was quite proportionally divided between public and private schools.

*

Due to the systematically falling demand, fundamental changes must be done to the higher education market. The above will specifically concern the departments that are fashionable today, which are offered by numerous universities, and the number of people studying them is estimated in thousands: management and marketing, administration, pedagogy, and a few others. The first of the enumerated is a “hard” subject, popular since the beginning of the system transformation because of its value for the job market. Today, the certificate of the subject itself is not as important, if only for the reason of the overload of the direction. Pedagogy, on the other hand, belongs to the “soft” subjects, noticeably feminine, where the relation between the specialization achieved and the professional work in future are not that distinct, yet also the motives of taking up this subject are less instrumental. There is an apparent deficit of specialists in technical professions.

The net of schools itself must undergo substantial changes. There are private schools that because of inefficient management or serious fall in the number of students lose their financial means and go bankrupt. The systematic and notorious fall in the number of students admitted to university is a phenomenon that will strengthen the tendency in the nearest years. Especially endangered is the existence of the institutions that create their budget of the tuition fees alone (there is no income from research, initiation, etc.) public universities are subject to the rules of the market to a much smaller degree. They are donated from the budget of the state, with the use of special algorithms (variable in time) that take into consideration, apart from the educational work (the cost consuming aspect of particular departments is noticeably varied), their research, own projects, grants, etc. Most of them have problems with “clipping” the budget together, and in some the deficit is growing from year to year, yet none has been closed, at least so far.

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