

Transition to the job market of university graduates. Opportunities and barriers

Słowa kluczowe: tranzycja, rynek pracy, kapitał kariery, absolwenci szkół wyższych

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The issues of graduates' transition from education to the labour market and their finding employment are becoming increasingly popular in various studies and analyses¹. Transition is defined as the passage from the world of education to that of work, which encompasses socio-economic changes. It occurs when individuals are 15-24 and they intensively develop skills in order to become productive members of the society². According to A. Cybal-Michalska, young people undergoing double transition – from education to labour market and from adolescence to adulthood – face some significant developmental aims, including cognitive curiosity, ability to explore a range of subject-oriented undertakings, setting life goals, ability to formulate hypotheses, drawing up professional development plans, choosing a career, as well as developing skills, qualifications and competence to

¹ D. Piróg, *Wybrane teorie przechodzenia absolwentów szkół wyższych na rynek pracy w warunkach gospodarki opartej na wiedzy*, „Prace Komisji Geografii Przemysłu PTG”, 2013, nr 23; Idem, *Wybrane determinanty tranzycji absolwentów studiów wyższych na rynek pracy*, [w:] *Dylematy współczesnego rynku pracy*, „Studia Ekonomiczne”, Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego w Katowicach 2013; Idem, *Opóźnienia w przechodzeniu absolwentów szkół wyższych na rynek pracy: Przyczyny, typologia, następstwa*, „Studia Ekonomiczne”, Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego w Katowicach 2016, nr 292; J. Wierzejska, *Absolwenci studiów pedagogicznych UMCS na rynku pracy*, Lublin 2014; *Poczucie zagrożenia bezrobociem młodzieży kończącej studia wyższe*, *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska. Sectio J – Paedagogia-Psychologia*, vol XXX, 2017 no 4 (artykuł przyjęty do druku); J. Wierzejska, O. Karpenko, *Wizja kariery zawodowej młodzieży polskiej i ukraińskiej kończącej studia pedagogiczne*, Kraków 2015 ; A. Barwińska-Maślajowicz, *Tranzycyjny kapitał kariery absolwentów szkół wyższych w Polsce – wybrane aspekty teoretyczne i empiryczne*, „Nierówności Społeczne a Wzrost Gospodarczy”, 2/2015, nr 42.

² D. Piróg, *Wybrane determinanty...*, s. 131.

implement them in practice³. A good professional start that marks the beginning of the adult life, allows young people to enjoy full social and professional participation and fulfilment of their plans and dreams, and, consequently, to derive satisfaction from the chosen career path. The lack of initial accomplishments, on the other hand, affects young people's future careers and professional development⁴. Unemployment and lack of prospects for finding a satisfactory position, especially one that matches one's qualifications and allows them to find fulfilment at work, may lead to social exclusion and limited access to the resources conditioning one's future development. Such restrictions not only cause stress and dissatisfaction as far as one's professional expectations and values connected with the future profession are concerned, but above all they give young people the sense of life failure that leads to certain psychological, social and economic consequences. A proper transition, therefore, requires finding not any job, but a satisfying one.

A successful transition of the university graduates to the labour market is conditioned by three equally important factors: economic (the condition of the labour market, the demand for specialists in a given field, the level of the innovativeness of the economy), individual factors (sex, experience, expectations and values connected with the future job, openness to new experiences, and the graduate's motivation), as well as the gained educational capital (the chosen field of studies, curriculum, attractiveness of the learned profession, involvement in the process of autodidacticism) which should be closely linked with one's place of residence and the region⁵.

The issue of transition has been widely discussed and theorized, and the developed theories concerned university graduates' entrance to the labour market and their participation in the social and professional life. One may enumerate, after D. Piróg⁶, the following: human capital theory, filter theory, segmentation theory, signalling theory and job-competition theory. Such a variety of scientific approaches and an array of employed methods have led to certain eclecticism as far as the description of transition processes are concerned. They all, however, have one thing in common – education. Different cognitive approaches provide basis for empirical research important for education, for the process of preparing graduates to successfully enter and prosper on the labour market, and for facilitation of graduates' professional development that ensures success in private and

³ A. Cybal-Michalska, *Młodzież akademicka a kariera zawodowa*, Impuls, Kraków 2013, s. 22.

⁴ Bańka A., *Poradnictwo transnacyjne. Cele i metody międzykulturowego doradztwa kariery*, MPiPS, Warszawa 2006.

⁵ D. Piróg, *Wybrane determinanty...*, s.133-134.

⁶ Idem, *Wybrane teorie...*, s. 148.

professional lives.

According to the **human capital** theory, for instance, success is determined by lifelong education rather than by the unemployment rate. In order to become successful on the labour market one needs to constantly develop their skills, gain new competencies and qualifications and broaden experience since this makes one attractive for the prospective employer. However, although it may significantly increase the graduate's chance of success, it is not a *sine qua non* condition.

This theory is connected with the **filter theory** which indicates that investment in human capital leads to diversity which, in turn, divides prospective employees into two groups: those with high human capital who are in demand and whose wages are high, and those who have relatively lower human capital and hence their position on the labour market is worse.

The issue of the level of educational attainment, as seen by D. Piróg, becomes even more evident in the **segmentation theory** that splits the labour market into segments characterized by different remuneration and employment policy. The primary segment offers stable jobs, higher wages, greater prestige and development opportunities, while in the secondary segment the wages are smaller, the chances for promotion are slimmer, prestige is lower and the development opportunities are limited. In order to become part of a given segment, an individual needs to display competencies sufficient to offer highest quality service or be able to work in the area of advanced technologies.

Also the next theory – **signalling theory** – refers to the level of educational attainment of the people entering the labour market, who should present proper diplomas and certificates to prove their qualifications and help assess their potential and productivity. In this approach, education is considered a formal examination of intellectual resources of a jobseeker. With the dynamically changing number of university graduates, the employers pay more attention to the reputation of a given university, the array of skills described in the Diploma Supplement, internships, apprenticeships, as well as whether the graduates worked while attending school.

The discussion cannot overlook the **job-competition theory** and **competence theory**. The former suggests that prospective employees will need to be trained, therefore the employers should be looking for people whose educational profile guarantees time- and cost-effective onboarding. The theory of competence, on the other hand, assumes that there exists a close correlation between one's competences, the time one needs to find a job, and the extent to which the job matches the educational profile and level of educational attainment⁷.

⁷ Idem, *Wybrane determinanty...*, s. 150-152.

It may seem that in the knowledge-based economy educational capital is of key importance and university graduates constitute an important part of the labour supply, hence they should be found especially attractive by the employers in various areas of economic activity⁸. However, the data on the unemployment rate among university graduates when compared with national level of unemployment indicates otherwise. The national unemployment rate amounted to 8.7% this January, however the unemployment rate among recent graduates is as high as 21%, which indicates the existence of barriers to young people's entering the labour market. Moreover, as many as 34% of the unemployed graduates remain jobless for over a year. This situation has been caused mainly by the skills gaps as well as a small number of job offers in Poland. Recent graduates in Poland twice as often as their EU peers have fixed-term employment contracts (56% compared to 26%). Of the recent graduates, 63% enter into fixed-term contract because there are no regular jobs available. It should be mentioned that temporary jobs are not very frequent in other Central and Eastern European countries – Poland is an exception in this respect⁹.

The empirical studies reveal that the graduates perceive the situation of young people on the job market as difficult. Employers seek employees with professional experience; therefore recent graduates with no practice are not particularly desired. Moreover, high unemployment rate, especially in Warmia and Masuria, Kuyavia-Pomerania, Western Pomerania, Subcarpathia, Świętokrzyskie and Podlasie, has exacerbated the problem. Young people are sceptical about the improvement of the situation in the foreseeable future. They claim that in order to find a job in one's hometown, one needs to have friends or connections. Jobs matching one's qualifications are available on the national labour market, yet finding one often takes a long time. Only some people claim that finding a job will not be difficult. Graduates in technical and science-related fields are significantly more optimistic about this aspect of the labour market than the graduates in humanities-related majors. Generally, the majority of graduates are prepared for a long job search¹⁰ and they indicate the following barriers to their entering the labour market: high unemployment rate in certain regions, lack of professional experience, and poor knowledge of foreign languages¹¹. Moreover, as observed by J. Wierzejska, the

⁸ Idem, *Wybrane teorie...*, s. 147.

⁹ <http://www.ibe.edu.pl/pl>.

¹⁰ J. Wierzejska, *Poczucie zagrożenia bezrobociem młodzieży kończącej studia wyższe*, *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska. Sectio J – Paedagogia-Psychologia*, vol XXX, 2017, no 4 (artykuł przyjęty do druku).

¹¹ K. Naumiuk, *Poczucie zagrożenia bezrobociem młodzieży kończącej studia wyższe* (niepublikowana praca magisterska w UPH), Siedlce 2016.

university graduates consider their qualifications incompatible with the employers' demands. Many of them also claim that university education does not prepare them for work in field of their studies; they believe the university education is too theoretical and therefore does not meet the requirements of the labour market. The situation of graduates who worked while attending school or had summer or winter jobs seems significantly better. As observed by J. Sęk¹², the graduates entering the labour market are willing to take any job instead of seeking employment in their field of expertise for a long time. Although one in two graduates express positive opinions about the professional competence they developed at the university, they are also aware that they do not have sufficient skills and knowledge to compete with those jobseekers who have prior professional experience. The fact that they have graduated from university does not change the situation. They, however, see a compelling need to broaden the skills so they enrol in postgraduate programs, specialized courses and look for internships in order to acquire new qualifications.

It is not surprising, therefore, that university graduates believe that it is easier to start adult life in other European countries. Brexit has not discouraged people from thinking about labour migration. The key countries of destination include Germany and Great Britain, but young people consider also Norway and the Netherlands, and recently also Iceland and the Czech Republic. Empirical studies reveal that this tendency continues. One in four graduates is determined to look for a job elsewhere, while a sizeable group (20%) claims that they will consider emigration if they do not find a worthwhile job in Poland. Nowadays, emigration is not considered a betrayal of the patriotic ideas, but is a matter of free choice of one's life path, one's identity and one's affiliation¹³.

It may be concluded that the successful transition of university graduates to the labour market is determined by the situation on this market; this, in turn depends on the economic development and the availability of workplaces in broadly understood services and in new technologies that make the economy innovative, as well as on the transitional capital of young jobseekers¹⁴. On the one hand this capital will encompass educational and professional experience – the level of educational attainment, skills and experience gained at work while attending school, internships, and summer jobs, as well as the attractiveness of a given field of studies compatible with the needs of the labour market.

¹² J. Sęk, *Poczucie zagrożenia bezrobociem wśród młodzieży akademickiej (unpublished M.A. thesis written at UMCS)*, Lublin 2010.

¹³ A. Bańka, *Poradnictwo transnarodowe...*, s. 23.

¹⁴ E. Turska, *Kapitał kariery ludzi młodych. Uwarunkowania i konsekwencje*, Wyd. UŚ, Katowice 2014.

Moreover, entrepreneurial capital – openness to new experiences, ability to learn new things and easy adaptation to the dynamic social and professional processes – is gaining importance. One has to be aware therefore, that linguistic, cultural and social capital makes starting the professional career considerably easier. It is impossible to imagine effectiveness on the labour market without the knowledge of foreign languages as far as communication with prospective foreign partners and learning about the latest scientific achievement, including those in the field of technology, are concerned. It is recommended that young people have diplomas issued by prestigious universities and certificates proving their skills and experience, in other words to make cultural capital more institutionalized. It should be remembered, however, that a university diploma opens the lock, but not necessarily the door¹⁵. It is therefore a preliminary, not a sufficient condition for success. The graduates should be taught to invest in themselves, to gain certain type of knowledge and skills, and to increase their “attractiveness” on the labour market.

Such a vision of young people’s careers requires social capital, understood as developing bonds and building social support. Moreover, due to the situation on the labour market, the role of career counsellors is becoming extremely important already at the stage when young people decide on future careers – career guidance may help young people avoid disappointments and fully use their intellectual potential and development possibilities.

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¹⁵ Z. Melosik, *Edukacja uniwersytecka i procesy stratyfikacji społecznej*, „Kultura-Społeczeństwo-Edukacja”, nr 1(3) Adam Mickiewicz University Press, Poznań 2013.

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Summary

The successful transition of university graduates to the labour market often determines their future career path. It is an important challenge for young people that comes from confrontation of their own professional expectations and plans with the realities of the labour market and the demands placed by employers. In the new reality, not only the possibilities but also certain barriers arise. Only people who are highly competent, ambitious, creative, and open to new experiences can overcome them. Showing these subjective and situational conditions is the essence of the article.

Tranzycja na rynek pracy absolwentów szkół wyższych Szanse i bariery

Streszczenie

Pomyślna tranzycja absolwentów studiów wyższych na rynek pracy często przesądza o ich dalszej ścieżce rozwoju zawodowego. Jest to dla młodych ludzi niezwykle ważne wyzwanie, wynikające z konfrontacji własnych oczekiwań zawodowych i planów z realiami rynku pracy oraz wymaganiami, jakie stawiają pracodawcy. W nowej rzeczywistości pojawiają się nie tylko możliwości, ale i określone bariery. Sprostać im mogą osoby o wysokich kompetencjach, ambitne, kreatywne, otwarte na nowe doświadczenia. Ukazanie tych podmiotowych i sytuacyjnych uwarunkowań stanowi istotę niniejszego artykułu.