

ABORD RI TEORETICE

CHANGING EDUCATION IN A CHANGING SOCIETY. SOME REMARKS ON THE POLISH CASE

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Abstract

After 1989, young Poles showed high expectations related to education. As a result of strong pressure for change, education began to open in the direction of popular expectations even before real reforms have been implemented. Later on reforms were promoted but schools, instead of playing a growing role in promoting young generation remained the same channel that helps families with promoting social and cultural benefits, contributing to the polarization of society. Therefore, further reforms are needed both at the pre-university and university levels to provide better educational and vocational guidance, to develop creativity and original thinking.

Keywords: “downward elevator”, educational structure, education paths, higher and secondary education, life-long learning, polarization of society, supply of education.

Rezumat

Dup 1989, tinerii polonezi au manifestat mari a tept ri legate de educa ie. Ca urmare a puternicelor presiuni în favoarea schimb rii, sistemul educa ional a început s se deschid în direc ia a tept rilor populare, chiar înainte ca s fi fost implementate reforme veritabile. Ulterior, au fost întreprinse i o serie de reforme, dar coala, în loc s capete un rol tot mai semnificativ în promovarea tinerei genera ii, a r mas acela i canal care ajut promovarea celor din familii cu avantaje sociale i culturale, contribuind la polarizarea societ ii. De aceea, sunt necesare în continuare reforme atât la nivel preuniversitar, cât i la nivel universitar, care s asigure mai buna orientare colar i profesional , dezvoltarea creativit ii i a gândirii originale.

Cuvinte-cheie: *înv mânt secundar i superior, înv are pe tot parcursul vie ii, “lift descendent”, ofert educa ional , polarizarea societ ii, structur educa ional , trasee educa ionale.*

1. New context and new challenges

Today education is a factor which most intensely differentiates the level and quality of life, the integration in society, into politics and culture as well as the health and psychological condition of people. There are also subsequent

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tensions and divisions stemming from the level of formal education. After 1989 the educational institutions became an object of pressure exerted by several parallel processes, where the most significant ones were of socio-cultural nature and resulted from new developmental impulses. These impulses were generated by the political transformation: the system opened to global influences, the need to put the economy onto a new track, to introduce a new system of social structures. These challenges met with the society lagging behind in higher and secondary education as well as the educational and life aspirations of the new generation. Under the pressure of social expectations the first changes in the education system were implemented, well before the system-wide reforms. The first and most prominent symptoms of these changes consisted in the definite reversal of general education schools and vocational education schools (Szafraniec, 2011).

Over the years the lesser importance of vocational schools has been paralleled by the increased significance of the schools providing an opportunity to continue education. A non-gradual change occurred in the mid-1990s. Young people, already aspiring at university education and high social status at that time, started to enrol in secondary schools providing general education (Domalewski, Mikiewicz, 2004). Undoubtedly the expansion of secondary education brought Poland closer to the group of modern countries. However, the scale of the change gave rise to new problems. The reversal of the vocational-to-secondary education ratio caused a decline in the percentage of students attending vocational schools which has currently resulted in the shortage of people prepared to perform some simple jobs. The situation of higher education became radically different as a result of the changes and under the broader circumstances (among which the most significant ones are: the economic transformation, changes on the labour market, increasing impact of globalisation). The schools had to face not only the influx of large numbers of students (originating from the old and new population boom), but also the competition on the new education market and new educational standards.

Poland became a country of people that intensely pursue education, and the education sector was the first one to experience the population surge. Since the beginning of the 1990s the enrolment rates at the top of the educational ladder have increased nearly four times. The social structure of students at private universities (higher education institutions) shows the importance of education in the Polish society. Despite of the high fees, most of the young people attending such schools come from less well-off families who live outside the capital (Wasielewski, 2006). However, such high

consumption of higher education is not reflected in the professional career. The educational system has lost its status-conferring function. As a result of excessive supply of education, a diploma is subject to devaluation, and to revaluation – its value, in relation to the sudden market saturation with university graduates, has decreased, but at the same time it has become an indispensable requirement for starting a professional career as a result of the market demands (Collins, 1979). In other words, diplomas and qualifications are less and less sufficient, and at the same time they are more and more necessary to achieve a better social and professional status which has become something of a rarity. Today, the same certificates, which in the 1980s created opportunities on the labour market, cannot ensure safe existence as they provide no guarantee of employment. This “downward elevator” effect, although mainly confined to socially challenged groups, affects more and more frequently those who have not been at such risk so far - university graduates, including graduates of courses considered to have guaranteed employment like economics or law (Beck, 1986/2002).

The professional future, awaited, and thus non-existent as yet, but anticipating the risk of unemployment, underlies the radical change in the educational system, and also in the approach of young people towards education. They become aware that although a formal degree gives no guarantee of a successful career, the education which enables acquiring a diploma and minimum reflection about oneself has evolved into an indispensable measure counteracting degradation. This conclusion forms the sufficient basis for continuing interest in university studies. Educational strategies become the axis of life choices among young people. The approach to studying style is changing. Education has grown into an instrumental value which helps to achieve a social and professional status. The learning and study period extends over a longer time, more and more often the education paths become individualised. It is more and more popular to study for two degrees at the same time, to combine studies with early professional experience. A new study culture (instrumental in achieving a CV) and a new category of expectations (focused on acquiring practical skills and knowledge) have appeared. Students have become demanding, but their demands have taken a different shape.

This situation seems to characterise the reality in many European countries and illustrates one of the most difficult contemporary educational problems – non-compatibility between the education sector and the labour market demands (*Global employment trends*, 2010). The solution to the problem is no mean challenge, similar to the quest for quality education or the

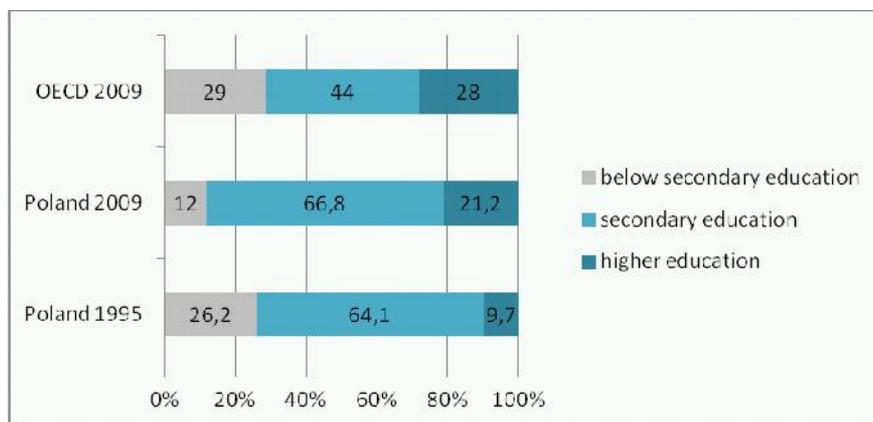
development of a system-wide response which could make the advancement of young talents and school careers independent of financial standing, place of residence or the family status. Although the education reform was only commenced in 1999, the legal guarantees for the sector of non-public schools, undergoing particularly intense development in the area of higher education, were established as soon as 1990. These schools assumed major responsibility for satisfying the outstanding and current educational aspirations of the boom generation. Poland has accepted the Bologna system to intensify the integration of Polish and European universities. Young people participate in scholarship programmes promoting mobility – learning, internships or studies in different countries. Polish 15-year-olds take school competence tests in the international PISA survey, and their results provide an opportunity to keep a systematic track of the effects of school efforts and to take important decisions concerning the methodology, curriculum, educational system.

All initiatives and changes referred to above show that Polish education, and thanks to it Polish young people, open up to a completely different world. It is not only a matter of how to design further reforms, but also of the limitations existing on the labour market, old-fashioned economy, conservative character of many academic and school environments, mental blocks experienced by young people. Determination, time and substantial financial resources to introduce bold changes are needed to overcome such difficulties. Nonetheless education continues to be considered an indispensable investment in long-term development and an answer to the fundamental changes occurring in technology, population structure and on the labour market.

2. Changes in the educational structure

After the Second World War the Communist leadership proudly advertised that "Poland is a country of learning people". The elimination of illiteracy, and also a widespread uptake of primary and secondary education (at minimum 10 years of school education), quite significant at that point in time, bear no comparison to the changes which have been observed in this area since the 1990s. Today, the time that Polish young people spent at school is among the greatest in Europe – it takes nearly of their lives (*Youth in Europe, 2009*). In 1995, the proportion of adults aged 25-64 with qualifications at the HE level was less than 10%, while in 2009 it was more than twice as high. This is well below the average rate for OECD countries (28%), however, the proportion of people in Poland with the most basic level of education (below secondary) is two and a half times lower compared to the average in the OECD area (Fig. 1).

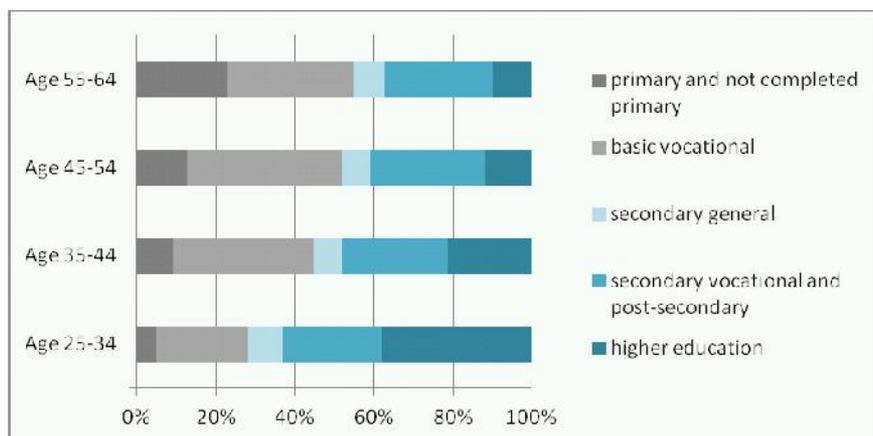
Fig. 1. Level of education among adults aged 25-64 in Poland and OECD countries (%)



Source: Own study based on the BAEL¹ data and OECD data, Education at a Glance 2010.

The younger generations are undoubtedly better educated. On average 35% of OECD citizens aged 25-34 have a university degree. Poland is one of the countries which have experienced the most dynamic increase in the higher education rate as a result of the educational activity of the youngest generation (Fig. 2).

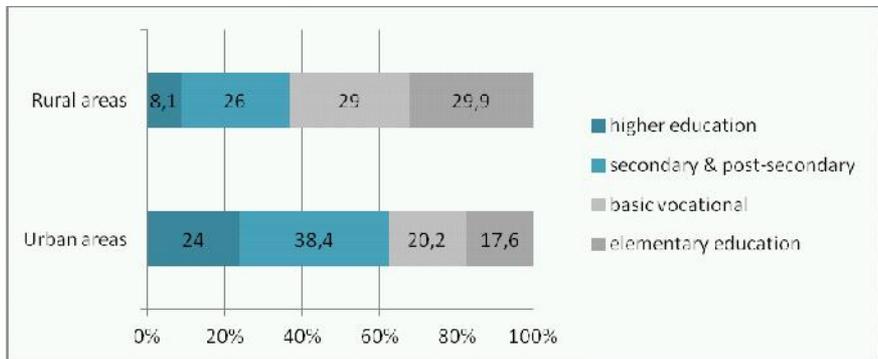
Fig. 2. Level of education among different age groups in Poland (%)



Source: Own study based on Central Statistical Office data, 2011

The changes in the educational structure in rural area are most explicit. In according to State Statistical Office (GUS) data the educational activity of the new generation reduced the percentage of lowest level of education in the total population (from over 60% in 1988 to 44% in 2002 and 33.6% in 2008), and increased the general percentage of university degree holders (from 1.8% in 1988 to 4.2% in 2002 and 8.1% in 2008). At the same time the level of education in urban area also improved, so the educational gap between the city and the countryside has not changed (Fig. 3). Nevertheless the dynamics of changes in rural area is greater.

Fig. 3. Educational structure of adults living in urban and rural areas (%)

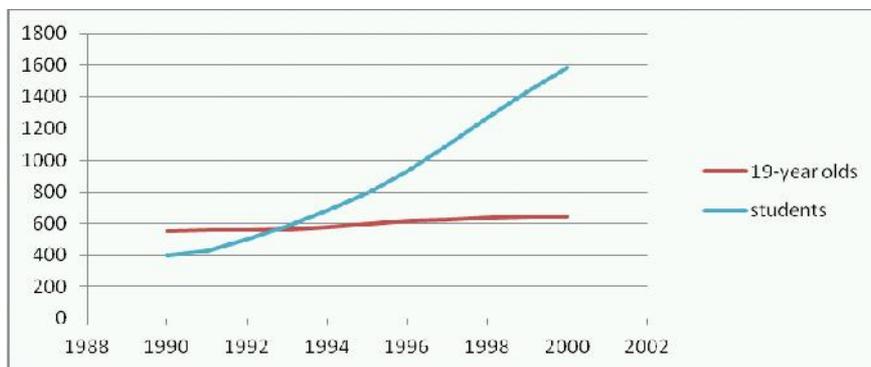


Source: Own study based on *Demographic Yearbook, Central Statistical Office, Warsaw 2009*.

Based on the observations of the educational decision of the successive generations of young people in the country, we expect that the educational gap between the urban and rural area will continue to decrease. This will occur despite the increasing costs of education and difficult financial standing of most rural families, and despite the devaluation of a university diploma, which increases the risk of good employment and smaller than expected benefits from education.

The discussed changes in the educational structure are mainly due to the educational activity of the successive generations of young people, nevertheless – as mentioned above – the new quality of social reality, new challenges on the labour market as well as the new, previously non-existent, educational opportunities caused adults to return to the educational system to improve their educational level.

Fig. 4. Number of students and people at the age of 19 in Poland (in thousands)



Source: Expert assessment by the Socrates Intellectual Capital Development Institute, p. 33, based on the Central Statistical Office data.

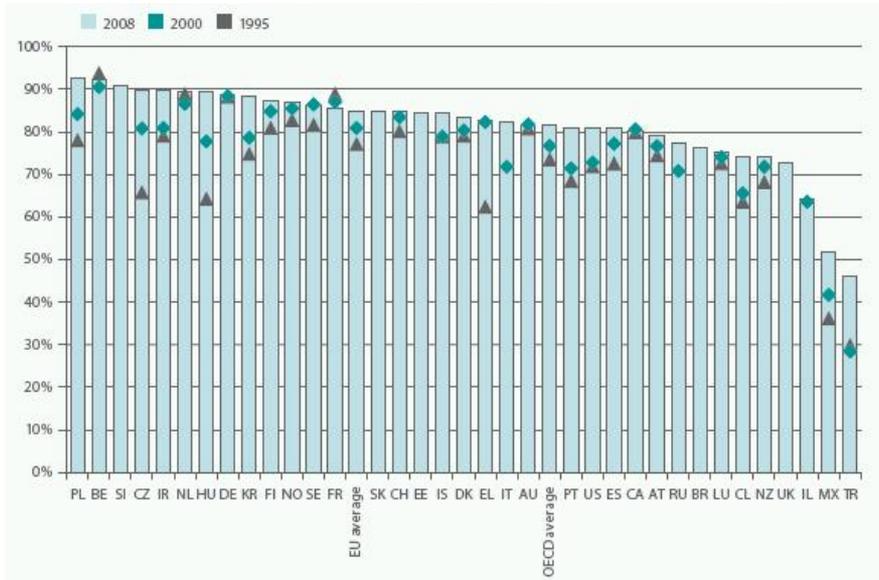
This situation is illustrated in Fig. 4, that shows the lack of correlation between very dynamic increase in the number of students and very moderate changes in the population aged 19. This means that not only young people changed their educational status, and thus their life chances but also the educational level of parents of these young people was subject to change. Consequently there is a change in terms of opportunities for both groups.

3. Young people in upper-secondary schools

Not only does the extension of the compulsory schooling period cause that the enrolment rates are going up. On average, 81% of the young people aged 15-19 participate in the education system in the OECD countries, 84% in the EU, and 92% in Poland (Fig. 5). Such enormous expansion of education in Poland is – on the one hand – a result of the legal obligation to attend school up to the age of 18 years old, and on the other hand, of the high status of education as a result of its noticeable societal and life role.

Since the beginning of the transition period, young people in Poland have been showing growing interest in general secondary schools (30% in the mid-nineties up to 60% in the school year 2012/2013). At the same time the interest in the vocational education – basic vocational schools, vocational secondary schools – has been declining (from 70% to 40%). In total, more than 80% of young people attend schools which formally allow them to take a university entrance examination. General secondary schools have the

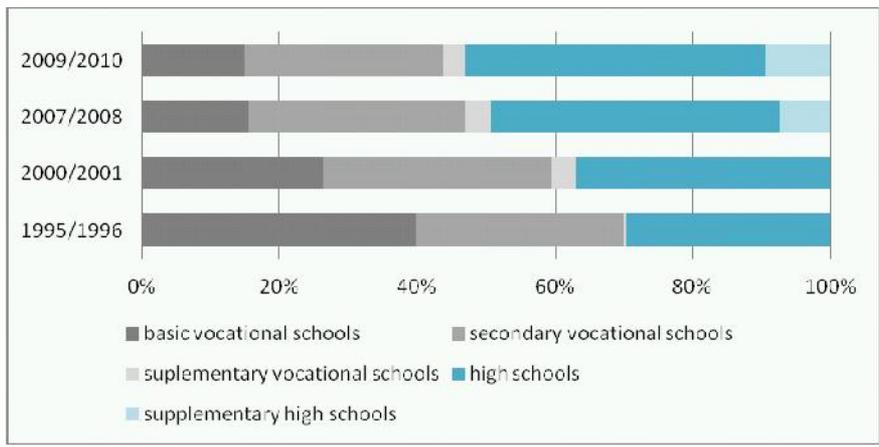
Fig. 5. Young people aged 15-19 participating in the education system



Source: Education at a Glance 2010. OECD Indicators. p. 298

highest pass rate – the proportion of students who take the diploma examination there is 84% in average, in vocational secondary schools 77.6% (Fig. 6)

Fig. 6. Educational preferences among upper-secondary first class students



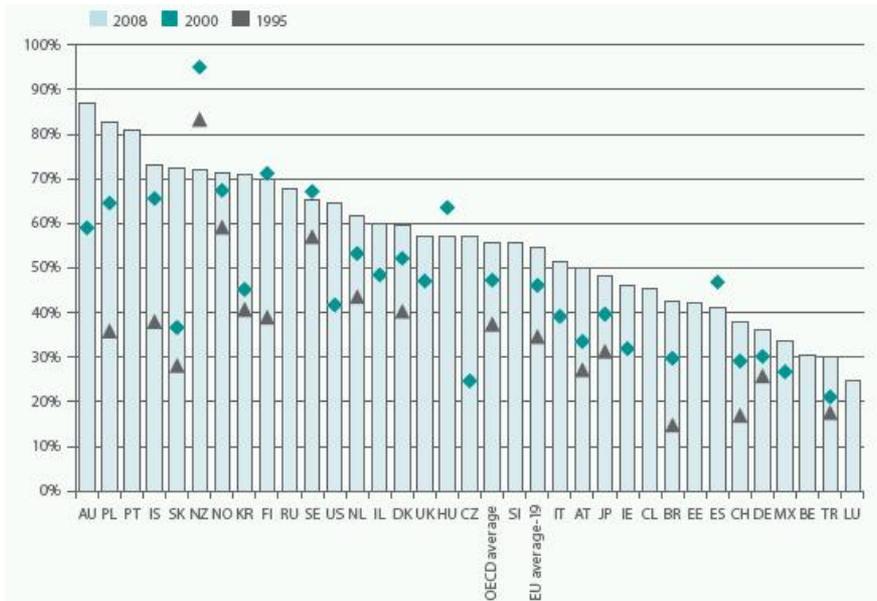
Source: Education in 2009-2010 school year, Warsaw, Central Statistical Office, p. 62.

For the last eight years there is a trend showing that the preferences of young people, especially those from families with low and medium socio-economic status, are starting to change. As a result of the labour market demands, young people have started to rationally revise their educational decisions and more frequently apply to vocational schools. The curriculum offered by these schools gives cause for concern – by both employers and young people who verify the quality of the acquired qualifications against serious difficulties in finding a job, primarily due to the mismatch of educational specialisation and labour market demands, but also insufficient knowledge of job practicalities, new technologies or foreign languages (Sztanderska, 2007).

The most often offered (and preferred) specialisations/courses are related to engineering and technology (more than 200 000 graduates), services (175 000), architecture and building (83 000), social services (70 000), business and administration (41 000), agriculture (32 000), environment (10 000), transport services (7 000). The traditional crafts have disappeared, while new options, generated by the new labour market have been introduced into the range of available options. Attempts are made to adjust the variety of new professions that are trained at school, however, no solutions have been achieved thus far, and the existing system of vocational training has attracted widespread criticism.

Another problem is related to the so-called early school-leavers. In Poland two thirds of vocational school graduates continue their education in supplementary technical or general secondary schools. The others leave the education system with very low qualifications. They do not aim at any further training or education. They constitute 5% of the young population aged 18-24. This marks one of the lowest rates in the whole EU (*Youth in Europe*, 2009). Most of the other secondary school graduates (82%) go to higher education institutions (Fig. 7) and this is a new quality. Only in 2000, the number of university applicants was higher in Poland than the number of offered places. For several years now, each secondary school graduate aspiring to higher education can achieve its goal, and the supply of places in universities is even higher than the number of applicants.

Providing greater access to higher education has a considerable impact on attitudes towards studying, academic life and the offered quality of education as well as the value of the university diploma. All of this is a novelty in the Polish culture, in social consciousness and on the labour market. However, it would be a large mistake to only point out the negative consequences of these phenomena.

Fig. 7. Percentage of secondary school graduates at universities²

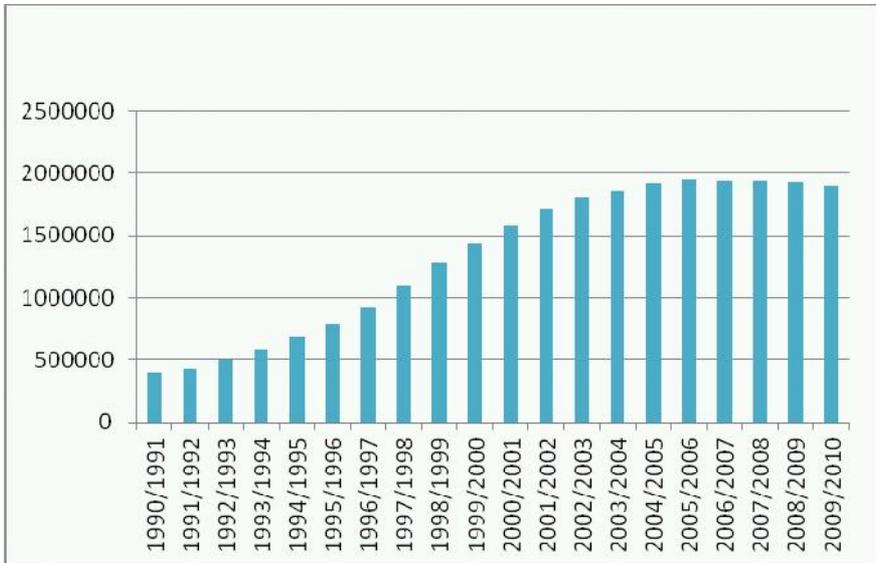
Source: *Education at a Glance. OECD Indicators, 2010, p. 48.*

4. Young Poles at universities

Before 1989 the education that was certified with a university diploma had high cultural value and symbolised membership of the elite circle of intelligentsia. In the communist time 16% of the employees used to work outside the sphere of material production. The post-industrial model of economy brought about extensive demand for well-educated employees, and new requirements of the labour market has forced the higher education institutions to introduce qualitative and quantitative changes. Under the pressure of social needs the limits of admission to full-time studies were gradually increased, and the limits of admission to distance education (paid) studies were lifted. Large numbers of non-public higher education institutions have been established – 326 since 1990. Although they are obviously orientated towards profits, they have coped with the majority of the society's educational needs.

Between 1990 and 2010 the number of students in Poland grew by 370%. The main burden of providing education was borne by public universities

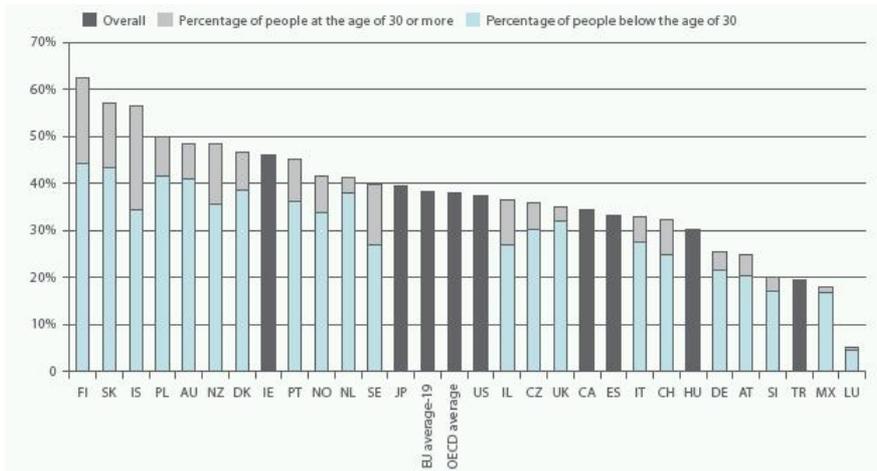
Fig. 8. Changes in the number of students in Poland (in thousands)



Source: *Impact analysis of the demographic conditions...*, p. 47.

(71.4% of the total number of students). On a permanent basis they offer about 820 000 places for full-time students, and 480 000 places for evening and weekend students. The non-public higher education institutions (with their three times greater number) have 600 000 students, many being enrolled in distance education programs (28.6% of the total number of students).

Even though the sudden increase in the number of students after 1990 is considered to be a specifically Polish phenomenon, the upward trends have also been recorded in the European countries with considerably higher saturation of the education market which suggests that the educational boom – despite the different growth rate and scale – has the same roots in the entire EU. These are new challenges of knowledge-based societies competing for predominance on the world markets. In Poland, despite small, albeit systematic drops in the number of students observed from 2005/2006 (as a result of the demographic decline), the net enrolment rate is going up, and not down. And its level hovering at 41.2% is higher than the average for the EU and higher than the average for the OECD. Also the gross enrolment rate is on the increase.

Fig. 9. Enrolment rates for the OECD

Source: *Education at a Glance 2010. OECD Indicators*, p. 58.

5. Differentiation of educational careers

Many sociological surveys confirm the strong impact of the parents' socio-economic status (SES) on the results of lower-secondary examinations and choice of upper-secondary schools by young people in Poland. The best students (most often coming from families with higher status) go to general secondary schools, average students choose secondary vocational schools, while the low-achievers (from families with the lowest status) go to basic vocational schools. Thus, schools are created with different cultural and social worlds which generate different standards of socialization and teaching. The sharp polarisation of schools, that was typical of the first transformation period, turn into a more complex stage. The more and more explicit homogenisation and elitism of the social composition of general secondary schools (especially explicit in the case of secondary schools with the best teaching results, where the percentage of young people from families with the highest SES reaches 60%) is accompanied by the heterogenisation and egalitarianisation of the social composition of vocational schools. However school careers in Poland still depend much more on the SES of the family of origin. School itself has rather small impact and it is much more visible than in the developed European countries, where family status does not determine to such an extent the school career and life opportunities for youth. Great Britain can be used as an example here (Fig. 10b). Although educational

achievements of children from families with low status are as frequent as in Polish families (similar percentage of young people achieve university education), the careers of young people from families with medium, and especially with low status, are very different. In Poland (Fig. 10a) the percentage of young people from poor families, who completed university studies, is very low (9%), in Great Britain it is 38%.

Fig. 10 a. Educational achievements of children (parents' age: 25-34) as a function of parents' education – Poland

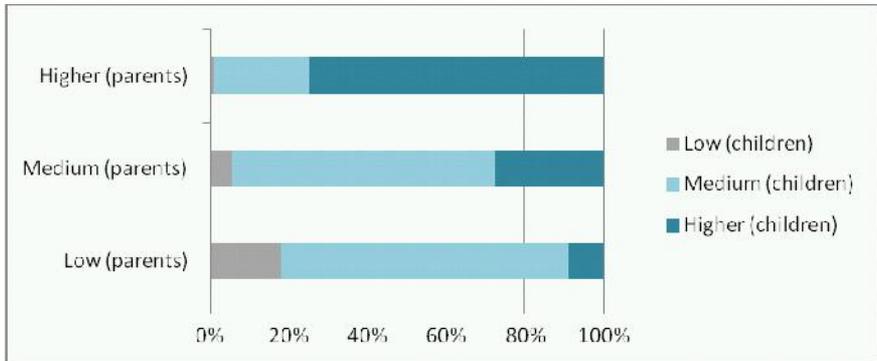
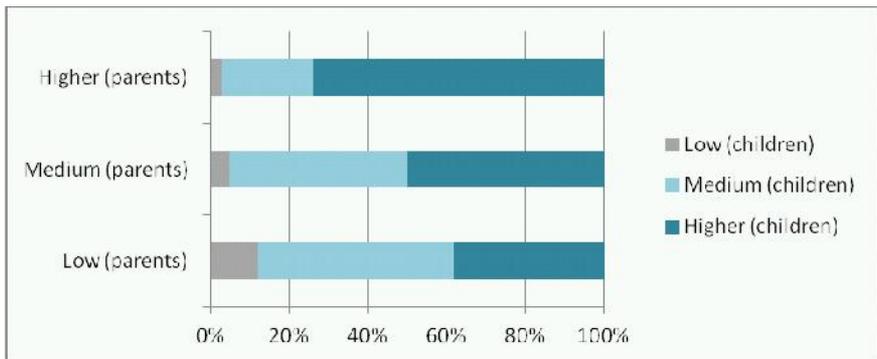


Fig. 10 b. Educational achievements of children (parents' age: 25-34) as a function of parents' education – Great Britain



Source: Own study based on Youth in Europe 2009..., p. 95-97.

The complexities of this process are very well illustrated by the academic careers of the young people from the countryside. In the reputed Polish universities they make 21% of the students, whereas in new low-ranking higher education institutions or the not included in rankings this youth get to 35%. The greater the competition during the admission, the lesser the percentage of young people from the countryside among the students. This rule is also true for the selected university courses. Young people from the countryside more often than once choose to study traditional courses, where the enrolment procedure is simpler (easier admission examinations) and with a smaller number of candidates (second enrolment cycle). At the same time those who choose a good secondary general school and good universities are usually better students than their fellow students from cities. Progressive strategies are characteristic for young people from the countryside – they are more cautious and rational in their educational decision, but their successes give them greater optimism and determination, and encourage them to further action (Wasielewski 2013).

The example of young people from the countryside and the data presented above show how strong the social determinants of educational career are in Poland, and at the same time how much they change the mechanism of allocation in the social structure, and how important the individual factors are in this respect. Thus, for a system-wide effect (greater contribution of education to stimulating individual and social development) it is necessary to provide system-wide solutions, stimulating the dormant potential of young people.

6. Life-long learning

Since the 1990s, Polish education have been an area of revolutionary changes. Education has become one of the most valued social assets, and educational institutions have undergone a real impact on the population, new – and earlier unknown – challenges as well as new political solutions. Both adults and young people participate in education, mainly with the aim of satisfying their own status-related aspirations. At the same time the civilisation changes permeating Poland together with the globalisation processes (changes in technology, work organisation, outdated job qualifications) transform knowledge: what was once acquired and certified with a diploma needs to be replenished and improved.

The developed countries respond to this situation with strategies aiming at expanding life-long learning. The concept of life-long learning is implemented

with different degrees of success in a number of countries. Most often it is used by the citizens of Northern Europe: Great Britain, Denmark, Sweden, Finland (*Youth in Europe 2009*). In Poland it failed to attract greater interest – 5,5% of the population participate in different forms of informal education. There are multifarious reasons for this phenomenon and they should not be reduced to mental aspects only. They involve such issues as e.g. willingness of universities to admit new tasks which provide an additional burden to their budgets and the first job experiences of the boom generation which are becoming aware that such solutions are necessary. Thus, it seems, when observing the progressing rationality of young people's educational strategies that life-long learning is soon to become a reality in Poland. The growing impact of the drop in the birth rate, and as a result the decrease in the number of potential students in the "degree-driven" studying system, will act as a factor mobilising to provide such educational services.

Conclusion

The basic problem lies in the inability to break the socio-cultural limitations. School, which was supposed to have significant influence on the young generation's promotion has become a channel selecting and positioning the youth in the social structure. This process usually starts at the beginning of schooling, then activates at the upper-secondary level and. At the level of secondary and higher education this process becomes particularly intense. Young people from families of high cultural capital choose prestigious schools, therefore they achieve spectacular educational successes. If the social makeup of a school is dominated by young people from families of low cultural capital, the results are poor. The external examination system, ranking schools and students, strengthens the polarization processes, which decide about the further educational path and lives of young people at a very early stage. In more developed countries schools (together with some other solutions) play a much more important role in breaking the socio-cultural limitations.

Everybody seems to understand that education is nowadays an indisputable medium of both individual and social development – not in terms of numbers or saturation rates, but in terms of high quality of educational services. Today, we need reforms that are oriented mainly towards universities and schools (related to programmes, methodology, changing rules for the selection of educationalists and research workers, which naturalise the requirement for creativity and non-conventional thinking). They should be complemented by activities aimed at supporting the establishment of professional and personal

consulting institutions which could help young people to take optimal decisions with regard to their educational path, professional career and personal advancement.

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ENDNOTES

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- 1 Data collected by the Central Statistical Office on economic activity of Poles.
 - 2 Mobile (foreign) students not included.