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UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' PREPARATION FOR  
THE TRANSITION TO THE LABOUR MARKET USING THE  
EXAMPLE OF BRZOZOWSKI DISTRICT IN PODKARPACIE  
VOIVODESHIP

Field: social sciences, academic discipline: public policy science

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## Summary of Ph.D. dissertation

Transition of youth into the labour market is a process, usually starting at the age of 15 – 24 years, during which young people gather the skills enabling them to become productive members of the society<sup>1</sup>. It is very important to ensure that the transition process goes smoothly and ends successfully by gaining a stable job that will allow young people to maintain on their own. If the job to school transfer fails, then the first contact of the young person with the labour market is unemployment. This has a very negative impact on the individual and the economy. The negative aspects of unemployment were the subject of many scientific publications<sup>2</sup>. There are two key elements shaping the transition process: educational system and labour market with its institutions

One of the regions in Poland with the highest risk of difficulties in transition process is Podkarpackie voivodeship. In 2016 the registered unemployment rate in the region was 11,6%, which stated the third worst result amongst all voivodeships in the country<sup>3</sup>. Young people (18 – 24 years old) accounted of 15,1% of all registered unemployed people in the region<sup>4</sup>. Slightly worse results were present in Małopolskie and Lubelskie voivodeships only (15,8% and 16,0%)<sup>5</sup>.

Brzozowski district has been selected for the research. The reason for choice was mainly the location of the district in the centre of voivodeship, outside of the main cities and industry centers. Two bigger towns (Rzeszów and Krosno) are located nearby. There are no big factories or companies in the district. The dominant form of business are small and micro enterprises and small farms. The economic situation, as described above, influences the transition process. There is no possibility for an automatic absorption of school leavers into the major companies. Apart from that, the district stands out because of the high registered unemployment rate. For many years Brzozowski district has been one of the three districts in Podkarpackie region, with the highest value of this indicator.

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<sup>1</sup>World Bank, *What is school to work transition and why focus on it?*, <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTEDUCATION/0,,contentMDK:21725024~menuPK:4995933~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:282386,00.html>, (19.05.2014).

<sup>2</sup> E.g. E. Kwiatkowski, W. Kwiatkowska, *Bezrobocie i jego skutki społeczno- ekonomiczne w okresie transformacji systemu społeczno-gospodarczego w Polsce*, Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, Toruń 1998, passim. M. Kabaj, G. Koptas, *Bezrobocie długookresowe. Przyczyny, skutki i środki przeciwdziałania*, IPiSS, Warszawa 1995, passim.

<sup>3</sup> Local Data Bank, GUS, <https://bdl.stat.gov.pl/>, (11.10.2017).

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem.

As all of the upper secondary schools and main labour market institutions in the district were located in Brzozów, it was possible to run the complex survey, not influenced by the factors connected with different locations.

The preparation of students for the labour market entry in Podkarpackie region was the subject of several surveys in the past. The researchers mainly focused on vocational schools though, leaving the general education outside of the study scope. The surveys focused either on vocational schools or on labour market institutions, but not on the links between those two parties and their cooperation. The only complex study that included both: educational system (but only vocational schools) and labour market institutions was conducted in 2006 and 2007 and since then no complex evaluations of proposed solutions were done.

The **aim of this dissertation** is to examine, using the example of Brzozowski district, how students in the last grade of upper secondary schools are prepared for the labour market entry. There was an attempt to define the optimal educational structure (general vs. vocational and fields of vocational education) responding to the demand observed on the labour market in the region. The subject of the analysis is the verification of how the educational system, specifically upper secondary schools existing up to 1 of September 2017, carry out tasks such as: educational and vocational (career) guidance; ensuring their students get the right knowledge, necessary for the labour market adaptation; cooperation with labour market institutions. In the literature, the evaluations concerning the level of preparation of youth for the transition process taken into account mainly the vocational school students. In this dissertation general school students were included, as they are facing the choice between further education (and which faculty) and labour market. The further goal of the dissertation is to define which factors mainly triggered the choice of the individuals' past educational and future career path.

Based on the historical studies and literature and taking into account the goal of the dissertation the following **thesis** was formulated:

*Among the factors that determine the educational and career choices of students in the last grade of upper secondary school in the current decade, knowledge about opportunities in the labor market and labor market institutions does not play a significant role. There is no clear definition of which entity should implement particular tasks in the field of preparing students for the adaptation in the labor market. Activities within the educational policy and labor market policy in this area are uncoordinated, and the quality and availability of the services offered differs between school facilities.*

In order to verify the above thesis, the following **research questions** were defined:

1. What is the situation on the labor market in the Brzozowski district in comparison to the Podkarpackie voivodeship?
2. What are the future career plans and which factors were triggering the educational path of the upper secondary school leavers?
3. To what extent are the pupils in the studied schools covered by educational and vocational guidance and what is the school career counselors (or people performing this function) professional background?
4. How are students being prepared for looking for a job and how they receive information about the requirements in the labor market, the demand in the market and the possibilities of getting help in the event of problems with finding a job?
5. What is the level of knowledge of upper secondary school students about the labor market, the proposed solutions dedicated for them and institutions supporting employment?
6. How are vocational schools implementing practical vocational training aimed at showing the actual work environment to their pupils?
7. To what extent the profiles of education in various types of upper secondary schools correspond to the labour demand in the Podkarpackie voivodeship
8. How does the labor market policy measures and services support the students of the last grades of upper secondary schools?
9. What changes in the educational system and labor market policy should be introduced in order to better facilitate the transition of students graduating from high school to the labor market?

The following research methods have been implemented:

1. Analysis of the secondary data sources:
  - The literature review;
  - Publicly available statistical databases;
2. Quantitative research, conducted in March 2016, among all last grade students in all five upper secondary schools in Brzozów.
3. Qualitative interviews, conducted in March 2016, with three directors, representing all five schools in Brzozów and additionally with one career counselor at school.

The dissertation consists of the introduction, five chapters, conclusions, bibliography and appendix. In **chapter one** the key elements of the educational system in Poland and

Europe where analysed in the context of the transition process. The chapter begins with the definitions of the educational system. Then, the literature review focusing on the influence of different factors on the speed and quality of the transition process has been presented. The analysis of available sources and case studies concerning the educational system structure, vocational educational system, Polish reform of school system in 1999, including its consequences for the labour market entry and the evaluation of different approaches towards career counselling at schools were used to form the conclusions. It has been proved that the educational system has the significant influence on the transition process. The following factors had the major impact on the situation of the young people leaving the upper secondary schools:

- The attained level of education – high school graduates usually found jobs quicker than people graduating from secondary or primary schools;
- Type of attained education – many studies shown that the countries focused more on vocational education noted better transition indicators;
- Good vocational preparation and high share of apprenticeship – helps to gather specific skills that traditional school classes cannot provide.

The main weak points of the Polish educational system in the context of the preparation for the transition process were: higher than recommended share of the general education (as a contrary to the vocational education), lack of links between vocational schools and business, not enough apprenticeships in vocational training, bad perception of vocational education and lack of career guidance at all levels of education.

As it was proved that even the best educational system cannot prevent all youth from unemployment and transition process difficulties, the labour market policy has an important role to help young people who do not find their first job easily. **Chapter two** was dedicated to the evaluation of different labour market policy measures and services, supporting school leavers in finding the job. The chapter begins with the definition of the labour market term and its main concepts. Then, based on literature and historical studies, various approaches to active and passive measures and services were described. Additionally the problem of deregulation of the labor market and its impact on the situation of youth was analysed.

In the context of the above considerations, the conclusion was that most of the labor market policy programs, addressed to young people, deal with tasks that should be implemented much earlier - at schools. However, there were some solutions that received positive evaluations. These were career counselling and job placement services. Those

solutions should be treated as the first line of support for young unemployed people. The second step should be the training offer, subsidized work in the private or public sector or internships. Those services should be, however, dedicated only to narrow, pre-selected groups. When it comes to passive labour market policy measures – one of the recommended solution was to offer small unemployment benefits to people with no work experience (so including the school graduates entering the labour market). Benefits for this group must, however, be conditioned by the necessity to show their activity in the search for employment.

The situation of youth entering the labour market could be somehow improved by the labour market deregulation. Those solutions, although in some cases evaluated positively in the literature, cannot be easily transferred to small districts by the local authorities, without having the approval from the government.

The **third chapter** is describing the upper secondary educational system and the labour market in Brzozowski district before September 2017. The upper secondary school structure was compared to the one present in the whole Podkarpackie voivodeship and in Poland. The wide offer of different professions available at upper secondary schools in Brzozów and surrounding areas was described. Using the available reports showing the secondary school certificate and vocational exam results, as well as the surveys describing the employers', teachers' and students' opinions, the level of education was evaluated. It appeared that the schools in Brzozów in most cases achieved good results.

The demographic and economic situation of the district was examined, taking into account the local development strategy. The region had rather favorable demographic structure, with a higher share of people at pre-working age than for the voivodeship. Unfortunately, at the same time, it has been achieving a negative migration balance. There were no big companies or factories in the district. It had a poor economic condition, with not well developed service sector, and inefficient agriculture. The unemployment rate was high, and the structure of education not very well adjusted to the labour market demand. In the district, mismatches could be noted both within the level of education and professions. The participation in general education was too high in relation to the recommendations presented in chapter I of the dissertation. Among the surplus professions some were offered by the secondary schools in Brzozów and the surrounding districts (e.g. civil engineering technician, food and nutrition technician).

The main institutions appointed to help young people entering the labour market were the Public Labour Office and Voluntary Labour Corp with its' affiliate in Brzozów: a job centre (Punkt Pośrednictwa Pracy) and Youth Career Centre (Młodzieżowe Centrum Kariery). Their main activities related to young people support were described at the end of the chapter.

The main goal of **chapter four** was to identify the areas in which the educational system was not very effective in preparing students for the labour market entry. The surveys were conducted in all five public upper secondary schools in Brzozów. The quantitative research, in the form of a self-completion paper questionnaire, covered all last grade students present at school on the day of the survey. The qualitative research was based on in-depth-interview technique, semi-structured with the discussion guide tailored for each school.

The research showed that students, when it comes to the factors influencing their past choice of the upper secondary school, were not a homogeneous group. At vocational schools they formed three, and in general schools two clusters, with different attitudes towards their past decision. In both types of schools there was a cluster of those who did not take into account the factors connected with the opportunities and the situation on the labour market. But in all schools the segmentation analysis uncovered also the cluster of those, who considered the labour market situation, their interest in the offered profession and possible future career development options as important. Pupils were also asked to evaluate their current school. About 45% of them stated that if they were to choose the upper secondary school again, they would change their profile/profession.

Not all students had the chance to get the access to the same services, aimed at the preparation for the transition process. Even though the regulations stated that the career counsellor should be present at upper secondary schools, the person performing this function was available only at one school complex – Zespół Szkół Budowlanych. The counsellor was not hired for a permanent contract – it was only a voluntary job. There were differences between schools and even classes at the same school in the participation in various initiatives, e.g. meetings with employers or career and educational fairs.

When it comes to students level of knowledge about the labour market requirements and institutions and also the ability to seek for the job, the results were ambiguous. On one hand pupils had the skills to write CV, covering letter, present themselves during the job interview, had realistic salary expectations. Some of them were already searching for job offers. On the other hand, they had a significant lack of knowledge when it comes to

the institutions, programs and possible benefits dedicated for young people in the labour market entry process.

School authorities had issues with indicating the regulations governing the preparation of students for the transition and defining the role of the educational system in this area. They were not in agreement whether specific tasks should be carried out by the school or the employment office. Despite that, they tried to take some actions, understanding the importance of such preparation for students.

In addition to the above the following issues were identified:

- There was a correlation between the attained educational level and professional activity of students' parents and the upper secondary school choice of their children. Young people from households where both parents had a job or had a higher education level more often were studying in general schools. Vocational schools students more likely came from the families, where parents were less educated and where at least one of parents was unemployed/inactive.
- Schools and labour market institutions did not exchange the information about the solutions dedicated for youth in transition. Therefore, e.g. school career counselor was not aware of The Youth Guarantee program.
- Vocational training (apart from one group that was taught in the dual system) was acting in a separation from the real working conditions. Education was focused mainly on achieving good exam results rather than reflecting the actual working environment.

In **chapter five** the problems identified in chapters III and IV were summarised. This led to the formulation of the following recommendations for the educational system and labour market institutions:

1. The career counsellor should be present at all upper secondary schools and also at lower secondary<sup>6</sup> and primary schools. The regulations governing the career counselling should be clearer, directly providing the sources of financing, indicating who should take care of career guidance, in which form and how often each task should be performed.
2. There is a need to promote the vocational training and to focus on changing peoples' attitude towards it (at the moment it is perceived as an option for less successful and less ambitious students). Current actions aimed at improving the

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<sup>6</sup> Up to the moment when they are finally closed.

vocational training perception should be supplemented by the career counsellor activities.

3. The „Enterpreneursip” („Podstawy przedsiębiorczości”) course should be moved to the end of the secondary education cycle, so the knowledge gained can be used straight away and does not get outdated (currently the course in most cases is around 2 – 3 years before students enter the labour market).
4. School should not be functioning in a separation from labour market institutions and business. Communication policy should be implemented to improve the information and good practices exchange between the schools, labour offices, voluntary labour corps and employers. The coordination of joint meetings and actions should be in the hands of one person (school counsellor or carrer counsellor at school).
5. Cooperation between schools, labour offices and voluntary labour corps should be governed by law and put into each organization by-laws. It has to be clearly defined who is responsible for each task.
6. Any documents or messages coming out from labour market institutions should be adjusted in the form and language to its receivers. Communication dedicated to unemployed or pupils should be written differently than the ones for local authorities.
7. New way of passing the information from labour offices to schools, regarding the graduates who registered as unemployed in 3 or 5 years after leaving school, should be implemented. The information, shared at anonymized level, should be a part of the wider report tracing the carrer paths and labour activity of graduates. The reports should give the possibility of running the reliable evaluation of the educational system and labour market policy services for youth.
8. Taking into account the unemployment rate in 2015/2016, and the self-evaluation of surveyed students household financial situation it is not recommended to implement the unemployment benefits for unemployed youth with no previous job experience.

The conducted research, literature review and available statistical data allowed to answer all the research questions and verifying the thesis. It cannot be said that the knowledge about market opportunities and labor market institutions did not play a significant role among the factors determining the educational and career choices, for all students graduating from upper secondary schools in the analyzed period. A large group

of students was highly involved in their past choice of upper secondary school. Their decisions were guided by the knowledge about the situation on the labor market and influenced by factors related to future education or career development. Therefore, in this aspect, the thesis should be rejected.

In addition, it has been shown that the existing regulations, designed to define the role of different entities in preparing students for the transition, were unclear for the representatives of the educational system. At the time of the study, there was no clearly defined list of tasks that should be implemented by schools and by labor market institutions. The cooperation between the school authorities and the representatives of labor market institutions (such as the Youth Career Center in Brzozów and the Labor Office in Brzozów) was not coordinated. Research shown that students did not have equal access to various services and that the initiatives covered depended not only on the school but also on the class. Therefore, the research thesis was accepted in this aspect and it was recognized that at the time of the research it was not clear which entity should perform particular tasks in the field of preparing students for adaptation in the labor market. A significant group of students was guided in their educational and career choices by factors related to their knowledge of the labor market opportunities and institutions. Unfortunately the the lack of unambiguous definition and coordination of activities between schools and labor market actors constituted a barrier to the proper preparation of students for the transition process.