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Caught in the trap of mass education – transformations in the Polish higher education after 1989

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KRZYSZTOF WASIELEWSKI

CAUGHT IN THE TRAP OF MASS EDUCATION – TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE POLISH HIGHER EDUCATION AFTER 1989[1]

Introduction

Starting from the system transformation in 1989, the system of higher education in Poland underwent such transformations, which, as regards their scale and scope, cannot be compared to higher education systems in other countries of the Eastern Bloc. First of all, the philosophy of university education changed and was based on new challenges, which, related to economy, on the one hand, and, to society on the other hand. The economy, which underwent intensive modernisation, started to show its demand for employees with high (academic) qualifications and the free market called for an opportunity to operate in the public space of private entities (universities). The society and, in particular, young people, for whom the opportunity to take up their studies was a chance to satisfy their "hunger for education" and realise high (and even higher) status aspirations, adjusted to the new challenges. Consequently, non-public universities started to appear on a mass scale and state universities started to accept even greater numbers of students, who mainly did their extramural studies. However, the dynamic changes in the area of higher education led to significant social and economic consequences. The intensive growth of the number of students was not in line with analogous growth of the number of academics and appropriate infrastructure. This, in turn, resulted in lower and lower quality of education. As years went by, one could also perceive the so-called "academic drift" more clearly as regards education in universities, which is manifested by a systematic growth of young people's interest in social- and humanities-oriented education faculties. Consequently, there was a considerable deficiency of candidates in universities of technology, which did not correlate with economic demands for these types of qualifications. This was directly connected with the lack of stronger relations between the labour market and structure of educational system – changes in school curricula and

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university faculties and subjects failed to keep pace with changes occurring in the labour market and young people's expectations. The problem results mainly from the academic character of knowledge provided in universities and system problems connected with implementation of changes in academic institutions. The little scope of cooperation between educational institutions and organisations operating inn the labour market is also significant. Presently, consequences of such trends are more visible in the labour market. Although a positive correlation between a level of education and income gained is still maintained, the statistics expressly show a relatively high unemployment rate among those with better education levels and, especially, among university graduates.

This paper has two objectives. One of them is to show the scale of transformations within higher education in Poland after 1989. The other objective is an attempt to discuss the route of development chosen by the Polish higher education system as well as analysis of social, economic and structural consequences of opening of the market of educational services. What were advantages and failures? Who/is was the beneficiary? The paper is mainly based upon source materials of the Polish Central Statistical Office [GUS].

Structural transformations and their causes

In the period of the Peoples' Republic of Poland (PRL) the structure of higher education system had not changed, generally, since the beginning of the 50s, when there were 83 universities in Poland with their 125 thousand students. Throughout forty years and until as late as 1990 its was only the number of students and percentage of young people doing their extramural studies that changed. In 1989/1990 there were 97 universities in Poland, including the non-public Catholic University of Lublin. Other universities were state universities. In those times there were as few as 404 thousand students, among which approximately 100 thousand young people took extramural or evening courses.

Between 1990 and 2010, i.e. within the period of twenty years, there was a real outburst of interest in university studies. In 1990 there were 112 higher schools, whereas now there are as many as 460 higher schools, which means that the number of such schools increased by over 4 times. Most of schools operating in Poland include non-public universities. Since establishment of the first non-public university in 1991, there have been as many as 328 non-

public universities in the market of educational services [see: Table 1]. It was the system transformation and changes in law resulting from the transformation, which made it possible to establish higher schools by economic entities (funds, companies, cooperatives and associations), which were able to fulfil specified material, organisational and financial conditions. Owing to this, higher education became one of numerous elements of the commercial services sector, which proved to be very popular and, consequently, profitable.

Table 1

The number of higher schools in Poland after 1989

Year	Number of higher schools	including non-public higher schools
1990/91	112	-
1995/96	179	82
2000/01	310	195
2005/06	445	315
2010/11	460	328

Source: Higher schools and their funds in 2005, 2010, Warsaw: GUS, the author's own study.

The dynamic development of educational institutions in Poland also resulted in growth of the number of people studying in such institutions. In the academic year 1990/91 as few as 403 thousand students studied in all universities (including state universities). In the academic year 2010/11 the number of students grew to reach over 1.8 million [see: Table 2]. Therefore, within 20 years the general number of young students in Poland grew by 1.4 million. It was possible owing to development of non-public education system and its institutions, where in 2010/11 as many as 580.1 thousand students studied. This means that students of non-public universities constitutes almost one-third (31.5 %) of the general number of students.

Presently, in state universities 67.5% of students include those, who do full-time studies and 32.5 % include those, who do part-time studies[2] (mainly extramural). It is different in case of

[2] Part-time studies include extramural studies (the system of studies involving classes held as sessions lasting from Friday afternoons till Sundays), evening studies (with classes held from Mondays till Fridays in afternoons and evenings) and external studies (for those, who were

non-public universities, where vast majority of students include those, who do their part-time studies (83.1%) and only 16.9% of students, who do their full-time studies. It is worth adding that the Constitution of the Republic of Poland guarantees gratuitous education in state (public) higher schools. Part-time studies are exceptions from this rule. This means that presently there are 990 thousand young students in Poland (including all students of non-public universities and students doing their part-time studies in state universities), i.e. 54 % of the general number of students.

Table 2

The number of higher school students in Poland after 1989

Year	Total number of students	including students of non-public higher schools	percentage of students of non-higher schools in the general number of students (in %)
1990/91	403.8	13.6	3.2
1995/96	794.6	89.4	11.2
2000/01	1584.8	472.3	29.8
2005/06	1953.8	620.8	31.8
2010/11	1841.2	580.1	31.5

Source: Higher schools and their funds in 2005, 2010, Warsaw: GUS, the author's own study.

As far as the number of students, who study in higher schools in Poland, is concerned, the growth trend reversed in 2005. From that time the general number of university students decreased slightly and systematically. Paradoxically, this situation occurred despite the growing number of universities. This trend results from deep demographic changes and it will soon contribute to far-fetched structural changes in the higher education system. From a study conducted by Socrates' Institute in Warsaw it results that in 2020 the number of students will decrease to 1.25 million, i.e. by 600 thousand students. The number of students will mostly

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not admitted due to closing of the list of students, but got a permit from a university bodies to do their studies as auditors; such students usually do not have student rights).

decrease in non-public universities and it will result inevitably in distinct decrease, even by half, of the number of non-public universities [Demograficzne 2011]. As far as state universities are concerned, most of them will withstand liquidation, but will be forced to modernise their educational policies and cut back on expenses. In such types of universities the crisis caused by a demographic low will especially affect part-time education. the part-time education system constitutes an additional source of income for state universities funded by the state budget. Everything shows that limitation of income from extramural studies will be reflected in employment of both administrative and academic staff. Universities located in depopulated regions and smaller towns will also find it difficult to survive.

The dynamic growth of higher education obviously had an impact upon growth of scholarization indices. While in the academic year 1990/91 the gross scholarization index was as low as 12.9%, in the academic year 2010/11 it was as high as 53.8%. [see: Table 3] This means, in fact, that nowadays every second young Pole starts his/her higher studies. Such a high scholarization index makes Poland a leader in the European countries as regards education of university students [Młodzi 2011].

Table 3

Gross scholarization index in Poland after 1989

Year	Gross scholarization index in higher education (in %)
1990/91	12.9
1995/96	22.3
2000/01	40.7
2005/06	48.9
2010/11	53.8

Source: Higher schools and their funds in 2005, 2010, Warsaw: GUS, the author's own study.

Young people's drive for education and systematic growth of scholarisation indices were expressly reflected in changes in the structure of education of the entire society. Until the end of the 80s Poland was considered a country of people with poor education. In 1988 only 5.8 % could boast off their higher education, whereas 39.1 % had only primary school education or did not have any education at all. Results of the National Census in 2011 show radical changes in the statistics. In 2011 as many as 17.0 % of Poles, i.e. three times as many as in

1988, had higher education and only 24.6 % had only primary school education, i.e. 1.5 times less than in 1988. [see: Table 4]. The changes obviously resulted from making up for losses in education of the young generation and retirement of the old one.

Table 4

People aged 13 and more according to the education level (in %)

Education level	**1988**	**2002**	**2011**
Higher	5.8	9.9	17.0
Secondary and postsecondary	24.9	31.5	31.6
Basic vocational	30.2	23.2	21.7
Primary and junior high school + incomplete primary school + without any education	39.1[3]	33.4	24.6

Source: NSP, 2002, 2011.

The dynamic growth of the number of students and mass establishment of non-public higher schools did not take place in a social and economic vacuum. The processes were directly connected with rejection of socialism by the society and, consequently, acceptance of liberalism and democracy as regards the political and economic realm. In the other area numerous established private companies, which constituted, to a considerable extent, to formulation of meritocratic principles of operation of economic entities in relation tom the state, had a key significance [Misztal 2000]. In turn, modernisation and privatisation of economy contributed to increase of demand for high qualifications, which could also be provided by higher schools. The newly-established companies (including, more frequently, those with a foreign capital) started to employ university graduates. At the same time, they

[3] Łącznie z nieustalonym poziomem wykształcenia.

had a significant impact upon increase of education and its role in the career process in the market. Starting from 1990 the proceeding liberalisation of economy was accompanied by a high correlation between one's education level and income gained. It should also be added that the increase of the number of students in the 90s was an element of deliberate policy of the state. The transformation and modernisation of economy also had an impact upon considerable reduction of employment in the state sector. This, in turn, had a decisive influence on growing unemployment rates, with which the young Polish economy could not cope. But for the intensively developing higher education sector, the generation of demographic high entering the market at the beginning of the 90s would probably have been doomed to unemployment. The higher education was, in this situation, a sort of a "safety vent", owing to which the state could postpone entry of hundred thousands of young people in the labour market for a few years and the very young generation could realise their educational aspirations and improve their competences, thus increasing their vocational opportunities.

All the above-mentioned processes had an impact on increase of demand for education and perception of education as highly valuable. Establishment of such a great number of universities, which educated so many young people was, apart from changes in the law, possible for two more reasons. Firstly, it resulted from the process of growth of educational aspirations of young people. The "hunger for education", which accompanied the Poles for the entire period of the Peoples' Republic of Poland aroused educational aspirations among young people, who saw acquisition of good education as their opportunity to succeed and find and attractive job. The level of their aspirations relating to education and status has grown systematically since the beginning of the system transformation [CBOS 2009]. From the research conducted in various part of Poland it results that Polish secondary school graduates have very high educational aspirations, as three-fourths aim at higher studies, of whom every fifth graduate does not intend to complete his/her education at the master's degree level, but wishes to do further studies (another faculty, doctorate studies, additional postgraduate studies) [Wasielewski 2009a, 2012]. Secondly, structural changes at lower education levels caused that education in secondary schools ending with maturity examinations and providing an opportunity to study at universities, became almost common. As many as 90 % of young people in a respective cohort study in such types of schools (secondary schools ending with maturity examinations). As the research shows, since the beginning of the system transformation, the number of students of the very secondary schools of general education

grew by almost three times, whereas the number of basic vocational schools students (which do not entitle to study at universities) decreased by almost 5 times. Owing to the changes, academic education became available to nearly all young people [Domalewski 2012: 60].

Consequences of mass popularisation of higher education

Generally speaking, it is relatively easy to establish a university. It only takes appropriate funds, decent infrastructure (a leased building will do) and at least four independent academics (with a degree of doctor habilitated) to establish bachelor degree studies and eight such academics to set up master's degree studies. However, the easy way to establish the studies has far-fetched negative consequences. Apart from prominent universities, which offered a respective high level education, they started to establish universities, which offered low level education or even dishonest educational practices in bad infrastructural conditions and without appropriate academic staff. Among most dynamically developing universities there are leaders, which invested quite high funds in infrastructure, hired complete staff and provide and attractive offer to students as regards subjects and appropriate curricula. Such universities offer master's degree and, more and more frequently, doctorate studies. Only such universities have a chance to survive in the market of educational services, which is becoming more and more competitive.

Changes in the law, which provided an opportunity for establishment of non-public higher schools also entailed a sort of symbiosis between staff employed at both types of universities (state and non-public ones). Initially, the vast majority of academic staff in non-public universities constituted academic staff of state universities, who sold their competences and labour in the new educational market. Such a solution was admitted by a respective act, which did not forbid state university staff to get hired in other places. This solutions had signs of a specific social and corporate compromise. Firstly, it complied with requirements of the new social and economic doctrine such as liberalism and economic freedom. After years of fight with private entrepreneurship in the socialistic regime, political elites found it difficult to restrict the freedom of establishment of non-public universities, which were, in fact, economic entities. Secondly, they adopted a concept of mass, and not elite, mass higher education. They decided to make it easier for young people to take up their higher studies and, at the same time, increase the number of students. This was mainly done by lowering of recruitment

requirements for university student candidates, which initially took place only in non-public universities and, later, as a result of competition in the educational services market, also in state universities. Although a higher school is easy to establish and candidates are easy to find, there was not a sufficient number of academics, who would be able to work in non-public universities exclusively. Therefore, they decided to make a compromise and agree to employment of state university staff in non-public universities as well. Thirdly, this solution was a sort of consent to financial compensation for state university staff, who were paid low salaries from the state budget at that time. In other words, the consent to additional work in non-public universities was also, in fact, tantamount to an informal consent to rather low salaries in state universities accompanied by an opportunity to gain additional (quite high) income in non-public universities. This was directly connected with low funds for state education from the central budget and, consequently, disproportionally low salaries in relation to competences and expectations, which, as a consequence, contributed indirectly to custom-related legitimisation of the process of multi-employment of academic staff. Fourthly, the solution was necessary in order to respond to social expectations of young people towards education. The pressure of the society in this respect was significant, especially that state universities could not initially admit (due to relatively poor infrastructure) and educate all interested candidates.

The specific symbiosis based upon multi-employment had for years been the most characteristic element of the image of the higher education system (mainly non-public education system) in Poland. During the first decade of activities of non-public education it was difficult to encounter independent academic staff (professors) employed on a full-time basis (in their so-called first employment) at such universities. There have been several reasons, for which independent academic staff has not been particularly eager to leave their state universities. The first reason is that state universities guarantee stable employment. The second reason is that state universities are providers of certain and stable source of income. The income may usually be lower even by several time from the income offered by non-public universities, but they guarantee certain old age pension payments. The third and most important reason is that work in the state higher education system is connected with significant prestige in the world of science and, so far, even the best among non-public universities have not been able to ensure such a prestige. What is important, the prestige in academic circles also entails a better opportunity of a vocational promotion, which is, in fact, certified by state institutions. This results from a centrally established career path in the

academic hierarchy. The structure of the path usually does not provide any opportunities of making an academic career through and within non-public universities. So far there have been nine of 328 universities of the type, which acquired rights to confer the title of a PhD. Therefore, academic career is, in fact, irretrievably connected with the state system of conferring of academic degree and titles.

Therefore, in the higher education system and academic circles there has been a sort of conspiracy of silence, which admitted employment of academic staff even in several and, in extreme cases, several dozen, additional places of employment. This procedure was obviously connected with decrease of the quality of education and far-fetched pathologies. It is worth noting that the problem of "multi-employment" of academic staff was connected with a series of complications, which particularly affected students. One of them included limitation of contacts between a student and his academic supervisor, who was travelling all the time between his/her parent university, which he/she treated as a priority, and non-public university/universities. It had negative consequences definitely as regards students' acquisition of knowledge and appropriate competences. The situation applied both to students of a parent (state) university and those, to whom academics had to travel (usually non-public universities).

In time, they have undertook activities in order to limit multi-employment of academics and improve the quality of education. one of the first steps included establishment of the National Accreditation Board (presently Polish Accreditation Board) in 2002, which aimed at supervision over quality of education and control of activities of universities with respect to their correctness. The Board has, among other, a statutory right to suspend a university's activities, if it finds significant irregularities in its activities. Moreover, in 2005 they implemented new regulations relating to undertaking of additional work by academics. The law may not forbid academic teachers to work in a greater number of institutions, however, an opportunity to exercise their rights resulting from a degree of academic title held, has been limited to two academic institutions only. A respective clause was also included, within the meaning of which a rector has to express his/her consent to undertaking of additional employment outside one's parent university. All the above-mentioned regulations, including natural social processes such as, among others, the demographic low, which forced universities to modernise as well as supply and demand rules based upon competition between state and non-public universities limited the number of irregularities in the higher education

system considerably.

However, a key element of the human resources policy proved an insufficient number of academics employed in the higher education system in relation to the growing number of students. In the academic year 1990/91 all higher schools in Poland (only state schools at that time) employed 64.5 thousand academics. By 2010/11 the number grew systematically to reach 103.5 thousand, i.e. by almost 40 thousand. In state universities the number of academics in that period (between 1990 and 2010) grew by 21.1 thousand. On the other hand, non-public universities employed 17.9 thousand academics [see Table 5].

Table 5

The number of academics in Poland after 1989

Year	The total number of academics (in thousand)	In state universities	In non-public universities
1990/91	64.5	64.5	-
2000/01	79.9	70.6	9.3
2010/11	103.5	85.6	17.9

Source: Higher schools and their funds in 2005, 2010, Warsaw: GUS, the author's own study.

The increase of the number of academics in the entire higher education system was manifested, in reality, in the growth of the number of academics in particular universities. From the beginning of the system transformation the number of students grew systematically. This, in turn, forced universities to increase the number of academics employed. The process applied both to state universities and non-public universities. In the academic year 1990/91 there were 575.9 academics per one state university. Within the period of twenty years until 2010/11 the number of academics grew by approximately seventy and now there are 648.5 academics employed per one state university. [see Table 6] In both types of universities there was a growth in the average number of academics per one university. As far as non-public education system is concerned, the growth of the average number of academics has been more dynamic. In the academic year 1996/97 there were 32.5 academics employed on average per one non-public university. In 2010/11 the number was 54.6, i.e. it grew by more than 50 %. [see Table 7]

Table 6

The average number of academics in state universities

Year	Average number of academics per one university
1990/91	575.9
2000/01	613.9
2010/11	648.5

Source: Higher schools and their funds in 2005, 2010, Warsaw: GUS, the author's own study.

Table 7

The average number of academics in non-public universities

Year	Average number of academics per one university
1996/97	32,5
2000/01	47,9
2010/11	54,6

Source: Higher schools and their funds in 2005, 2010, Warsaw: GUS, the author's own study.

The number of academics employed in higher education schools (both state and non-public] may have grown since 1990, the changes did not correspond to the number of students admitted. In the academic year 1990/91 in all active universities (only state ones) there were 6.3 students on average per one academic. In 1995/96, i.e. in the period of activities of non-public higher education, the number was 11.9, i.e. almost twice more as compared to 1990/91. In the academic year 2000/01 there were 18.4 students per one academic and in the peak year 2005/2006 there were as many as 19.7 students. Therefore, between 1990 and 2005 the number of students per one academic grew by as much as three times [see Table 8]. This means that didactic load of academics grew systematically and, consequently, the quality of education also increased. It was only from that time that the average number of students per one academic started to drop.

General trends are also well visible in the division into university types. We may perceive an analogous trend both in state and non-public universities. In the academic year 1990/91 in all

active universities (only state ones) there were only 6.3 students on average per one academic; in 2000/01 there were 15.8 students and in the peak time, i.e. in the academic year 2005/2006 there were as many as 17.6 students per one academic. In the period from 1990 to 2005 the quality of education worsened systematically, which was manifested in, among others, growth of the average number of students per one academic by three times. As late as after 2005 the trend reversed and now the number is 14,7 [see Table 8]. With dynamic development of non-public universities and until 2000/01 the average number of students per one academic grew considerably. In the peak period in 2000/01 the number was 50.5 to decrease to 32.4 now.

Generally speaking, there are clearly more students per one academic in non-public universities. In the culminating 2000/01 in non-public universities the average number of students was 3.2 times greater than in state universities. Presently the relation is 2.2. therefore, the distance between state and non-public universities clearly decreased in this respect. It is worth noting that in state universities the average number of students per one academic started to decrease five years later than in non-public universities, i.e. in the academic year 2005/06. [see Table]. This is significant, as already in 2000/01 they recorded in the entire education system a greater number of vacancies for potential students as compared to the number of all interested student candidates. This may mean, on the one hand, that non-public education system was affected by a crisis connected with the demographic low entering the market and a fight for students between state and non-public universities. On the other hand, it may mean a quicker response of the educational sector to young people's expectations of higher quality education. Regardless of, which of the factor we may deem most important, it is true that the quality of education improved much quicker in non-public education system.

Table 8

The average number of students per one academic in total

Year	**Average number of students per one academic in total**	**In state universities**	**In non-public universities**
1990/91	6.3	6.3	-
1995/96	11.9	no data available	no data available
2000/01	18.4	15.8	50.5
2005/06	19.7	17.6	36.8

2010/11	17.8	14.7	32.4

Source: Higher schools and their funds in 2005, 2010, Warsaw: GUS, the author's own study.

The above-mentioned trend is also visible in case of a selectivity coefficient[4], which determines a relation of the total number of student tot the total number of graduates. In some simplification it shows processes of selectivity of students during studies. Although the coefficient is rather conventional, it shows a significant trend as regards the education policy at universities in Poland. As late as in the middle of the 90s the selectivity coefficient was maintained at a high level, however, in time, it began to drop systematically. In the academic year 1994/95 it was 7.7, however, now it is only 4.0. This drop occurred, first of all, "owing to" state universities, which particularly clearly decreased their requirements towards students. Between 1994/95 and 2009/10 the selectivity coefficient in state education system decreased almost twice. [see Table 9]. This process results from the fact that more and more students are admitted and selectivity during studies is decreased. This was favoured by changes in the recruitments procedure for student candidates. As late as in 2002 higher schools could select student candidates by way of their own recruitment proceedings (so-called entrance examinations). Since 2002 selective functions have been replaced by maturity examination results, which had a uniform character in all regions of Poland. The academic circles agreed that the change contributed to decrease of the level of student candidates.

Table 9

The selectivity coefficient in higher education system in Poland after 1989

Year	**Selectivity coefficient in total (relation of the total number of students to the total number of graduates)**	**In state universities**	**In non-public universities**
1990/91	7.2	7.2	-
1994/95	7.7	7.5	no data available

[4] The higher value of the coefficient, the greater degree of selectivity of students during their studies in higher education system. Thus, it may be assumed conventionally that the coefficient also shows quality of education.

2000/01	5,2	5,0	5,9
2005/06	5,0	5,0	4,8
2009/10	4,0	3,9	4,0

Source: Higher schools and their funds in 2005, 2010, Warsaw: GUS, the author's own study.

However, it is worth adding that the demographic low and competition between universities as regards students caused that both state and non-public universities decided to maintain a low level of student selectivity deliberately. This situation applies both to the even lower threshold for admission of students for their 1st year studies as well as selection of students (screening) during their studies. In practice, candidates with even lower level of knowledge are admitted to 1st year studies (more frequently all interested candidates are admitted) and during studies the level of examinations and credits is also decreased in order to minimise student selection. Owing to such practices a lot of universities limit reduction and screening of students, which affect the greater number of students. This, in turn, contributes to a better financial standing of the entire university. In case of state universities, it is connected with budget subsidies, which is a direct function of the number of students at a given university. In other words, the rule is that public money accompanies students. The analogous rule is also true for non-public universities, which are maintained, almost totally, from tuition fees paid by students.

However, the described situation has much improved. There have been changes in legal provisions making requirements for establishment of universities more stringent. They have also implemented regulations, which are to contribute to improvement of quality of academic staff. They have also worked on changes in the method of funding of the entire education system. The changes will entail awarding best universities financially (both as regards the didactic and research sphere). Ranking lists of universities published in Polish press have become more and more significant (as regards assessment of quality and social perception of universities). Although it is difficult to find non-public universities at the top of the lists, such ranking list are very important for such types of universities. This results from the fact that ranking lists published in the press shape supply of better universities in an unbiased manner and, at the same time, depreciate those offering lowest education levels. Such factors undoubtedly favour improvement of quality of education in universities – in order to leap several ranks higher in a university ranking list it is necessary to improve the educational

offer, employ better academic staff and increase expenses on research and infrastructure. The advantages are measurable – by improving quality of education a university will gain a higher social prestige and, consequently, it will become more popular, thus increasing the supply of its offer among potential students. As for students, who provide specific funds, they have an opportunity to receive education at a higher level.

The higher education system vs. labour market

Availability of education for masses has a significant impact upon increase of scholarization indexes within the higher education system. However, their growth was not proportional to the demand for qualifications in economy. In other words, the pace, at which university graduates were "released" into the labour market and dynamics of growth of the education level of the Poles anticipated transformation in the sphere of economy. As late as in 1990 there were as few as 56.1 thousand university graduates. However, then years later, in 2000, there were five times more graduates, namely 304.0 thousand and in 2009 there were as many as 478.9 university graduates. The dynamic growth of the number of university graduates took place, to a considerable extent, in non-public universities, which, within 15 years from 1995 to 2009, increased the number of promoted graduates from 2.3 to 157.6 thousand. The number constitutes 1/3 (32.9 %) of the total number of university graduates in Poland [see Table 10]. In total, between 1990 and 2009, all universities in Poland released 4.98 million graduates.

Table 10

The number of university graduates in Poland after 1989

Year	Total number of university graduates (in thousand)	including graduates of non-public universities (in thousand)	percentage of graduates of non-public universities per the total number of graduates (in %)
1990	56.1	-	-
1994	89.0	2.3	2.6
2000	304.0	79.8	26.2
2005	394.0	129.2	32.8
2009	478.9	157.6	32.9

Source: Higher schools and their funds in 2005, 2010, Warsaw: GUS, the author's own study.

The following courses were most popular among students: economic and administrative, social, pedagogical and humanities. The course do not entail any costs for a university, as they do not require any specialist workshops or laboratories, expensive equipment and investments in infrastructure. Thus, such courses can be launched relatively easily and nowadays they can be found in nearly all state universities and in most of non-public universities. In the academic year 2000/01 the percentage of all Polish students doing such courses was 58.8%, whereas nowadays it is 53.8% students. [see Table 11]. The outlined trend is usually referred to as an "academic drift" and applies to a situation, in which young people chose social and economic or general humanities courses, which are deemed easier to study, as they do not require any knowledge of mathematics and physics. In Poland this trend was supported by resignation in the 90s from the mandatory maturity examination in Maths for secondary school students (now post junior high school students). As it turned out years after, this decision had very negative consequences. Firstly, the level of knowledge of secondary schools graduates, i.e. future university students, decreased. This, in turn, lowered the level of education in universities, which, under the pressure of social expectations and the market, adjusted their requirements to the level of knowledge of their "customers". Secondly, young people lost their interest in universities and courses with Maths as a key subject, i.e. universities of technology. Thirdly, this caused deficiencies in the number of qualified graduates of technical and engineering faculties in the labour market. Presently, they constitute only 7.2% of the total number of students, whereas in the academic year 2000/01 an analogous percentage was twice higher and amounted to 15.0%. [see Table 11]

Table 11

Students according to course groups (in %)

Course group	2000/01	2005/06	2010/11
Economic and administrative	27.5	25.7	22.6
Social	13.9	13.5	12.0
Pedagogical	10.4	12.8	11.8
Humanities	7.0	8.0	7.5
Engineering and technical	15.0	7.9	7.2

Medical	2.4	4.7	7.2
Architecture and building	0.1	2.9	4.2
IT	2.8	5.3	4.0
Human services	1.1	3.3	3.6
Production and processing	no data available	1.4	3.5
Legal	3.8	2.8	3.2
Other	16.0	11.7	13.2

Source: Higher schools and their funds 2005, 2010; Mały Rocznik Statystyczny 2001.

It was roughly by the end of the 90s that graduation from a university almost always guaranteed finding an attractive job. Later, as the labour market began to saturate with highly qualified workers, one could observe the process of employment of university graduates in positions, which did not require a university completion diploma. In 2010 only more than a half (54%) of university graduates took up their first jobs, which corresponded to their professions learned. The rate of employment among university graduates increased systematically (although it was lowest among all groups of education) – in 1995 the unemployment rate was 1.5 % and in 2012 it was "already" 5.4 % [NSP 2002, 2011]. This growth was a consequence of a relatively high unemployment rate among university graduates, which was 21.3 % in 2012. This means that, upon completion of education, every fifth university graduate, is unemployed. As detailed statistics show they mainly include graduates of faculties of humanities and pedagogy [Młodzi 2011; Szkoły 2011]. Thus, these courses are most popular and most commonly available in the Polish higher education system.

Therefore, it seems that presently the greatest problem of the Polish higher education system is that it is not adjusted to the labour market requirement and demands. This applies, in particular, to higher education, including, most of all, universities. The society demands that they should response flexibly to its demands towards graduates with qualifications, which are most useful in the labour market. However, in practice, such types of demands are impossible to realise. The main reason for this is that universities, as such, are conservative schools and, at the same time, find it difficult (in fact, academics also find it difficult themselves) to change curricula, forms of lecturing and resign from connections with private business etc.

Such changes could contribute to deeper connection of education and labour market. However, the basic condition for such symbiosis should be increase of the number of hours of student vocational placements and even more frequent solving of real problems during university classes. It would also be significant to introduce other "innovations" such as, for example, admitting of participation of practitioners in university education and establishment of closer cooperation with various types of plants and companies in order to conduct vocational education courses. However, it is difficult to introduce such changes in universities of academic character. Non-public universities can cope better with expectations of the labour market, as they are more flexible and open to signals from young people and entrepreneurs. Their responses to demand for particular courses are definitely quicker, as their life depends on such solutions. As a consequence, such universities are much better assessed by students as regards their attitude to employers' requirements. This is proved by higher ranks of the universities in ranking lists, which do not consider an academic character of a university, but effective allocation of graduates in the labour market. There are several non-public universities leading in such rankling lists.

One should also mention one process, which is a consequence of opening of the higher education market in Poland and making higher studies more common. Mass education of young people in higher schools led to gradual devaluation of university diplomas. This, in turn, caused that a diploma, which was desired by the society and was relatively easy to acquire, became a necessary, but insufficient certificate of one's qualifications. This is clearly manifested both in even higher educational aspirations of young people [Domalewski, Mikiewicz 2004; Wasielewski 2007] and in real educational decisions, which result in even greater popularity of postgraduate studies, MBA or additional courses. It seems that new requirements of the labour market nowadays become a new selection threshold. It is not formal education (a university diploma) that determines finding a job, but additional competences (especially other than academic) and individual skills, which an individual has to prove during his/her interview or placement. At the same time, the very university diploma becomes less significant and any additional activities of young people in the course of their studies become more and more significant.

Transformations in the higher education system vs. social inequalities

The research on availability of young people as regards higher studies as conducted in Poland after 1989 show that the initial period of system transformation considerably affected the growth of impact of a social status[5] upon availability of higher studies. The social mobility between generations decreased and the social structure became more "rigid". Individuals raised in families with a higher social status had much greater opportunities than in the 80s to take a higher social rank than individuals, who were raised in families with lower social ranks. As compared to the previously observed trends, the first selection threshold (between the primary and secondary school) became less significant, whereas the second threshold (selection of secondary school graduates at the entrance to the higher education system) determined careers of young people [Białecki 1999; Domański 2000]. After this transformational shift, which, most of all, resulted from a violent revaluation of the role of education in the society and economy, inequalities as of the period of the system transformation became relatively stable [Domański 2004]. It results from the research that, although in the other half of the 70s young people from rural areas had 8 times lesser opportunities to get to a university as compared to their peers from urban areas, in 2000 this distance decreased by almost four times and rural young people had "only" twice lesser opportunities to get to a university as compared to their urban peers [see: Świerzbowska-Kowalik 2000: 112-119].

Nowadays, rural and less well-off young people have an even more open access to higher education. In this respect the scale of inequality decreases in time. Students of rural origin and less well-off students are more often to be found in universities, including state universities. The changes are significant and, yet, very diversified. The above-mentioned transformations were affected considerably by the appearing mass non-public higher education. The considerable number of such universities are located in smaller cities, thus giving poorer young people, who cannot afford to go to a big and expensive city, real opportunities to take up their studies. Classical universities are found in big cities (located mainly in cities with over 200 thousand inhabitants), which clearly has an impact upon their elite character. Generally speaking, in the academic year 2006/2007 as many as 119 out of 456 universities were located in cities with less then 100 thousand inhabitants, including 65 in cities with less

[5] It is worth noting that the studies indicate to influence of social and vocational rank of a family and not the residence environment.

than 50 thousand inhabitants, of which there were three universities located in villages. Most of (49) universities located in smaller cities are non-public universities and other include, most of all, state vocational higher schools (see Table 12). However, one cannot forget about 227 branch departments (mainly conducted by non-public universities), which are also located in smaller cities [Szkoły wyższe 2007: 23]. It is not surprising that universities located in smaller academic centres (mainly non-public universities) and in regions dominated by rural people enjoy even greater popularity among rural young people (mainly owing to their easier availability).

Table 12

Spatial distribution of universities in Poland

Województwo	**Number of universities**		
	In cities with less than 100 thousand inhabitants	In cities with more than 100 thousand inhabitants	In total
Dolnośląskie	7	30	37
Kujawsko-pomorskie	2	17	19
Lubelskie	11	12	23
Lubuskie	3	5	8
Łódzkie	7	21	28
Małopolskie	11	24	35
Mazowieckie	19	87	106
Opolskie	2	4	6
Podkarpackie	13	4	17
Podlaskie	9	11	20
Pomorskie	11	20	31
Śląskie	5	38	43
Świętokrzyskie	4	11	15
Warmińsko-mazurskie	3	7	10
Wielkopolskie	10	27	37
Zachodniopomorskie	2	19	21
TOTAL	**119**	**337**	**456**

Source: the data of MNiI, MON, MZ, the author's own study.

Thus, it seems that the intensive development of the non-public education sector in Poland had a considerable impact upon decrease of educational inequalities as regards access to higher education. Maria Jarosz indicates that, paradoxically, non-public universities, which are paid universities, became more available to rural young people [Jarosz 2004: 174]. This process has an undoubtedly positive character, but it also has its disadvantages. It turns out that social and background inequalities may decrease in a general balance, but they are much more manifested in other spheres. Social inequalities in rural young people's access to higher studies are, most of all, visible at the level of specific university faculties and courses, where they are emphasized by a diversified social and background composition of young people. The allocation character may not be an indicator of social inequalities, but factors shaping the allocation have such a diagnostic value. The main factors, which differentiate presence of rural young people in universities is the process of auto-selection manifested by selection of specified universities and university courses, mainly for teachers, popularity of a given course (including, but not limited, to prestige of a course, demand for certain competences) and location of a given course within a specific faculty, which entails a specific recruitment policy (number of students admitted, possible entrance examinations etc.). It results from the research that young people from villages more often choose higher schools with lower prestige and quality of education and they mostly choose non-public universities and traditional courses. However, urban young people more often got to renowned state universities, which provide education at a stable and high level and they choose courses, which are popular and considered as profitable in the future [Gorlach 2005; Świerzbowska-Kowalik 2000: 116; Wasielewski 2009b, 2010, 2012]. Such choices result in diversified distribution of students with various backgrounds in the vocational structure. Persons choosing better and more prestigious universities and courses (including persons from families with high ranks and usually intellectual traditions, mostly residing in big cities) have a greater opportunity to get an interesting and attractive job. This way, background inequalities as regards access to education (in some veiled form) are transmitted again to the social structure by a social and vocational rank held by an individual [Wasielewski 2006].

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