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THE IMPACT OF PROFESSIONAL TRAINEESHIP ON THE STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THEIR KNOWLEDGE AND FUTURE WORK IN THE AGRIBUSINESS SECTOR

WPLYW PRAKTYK ZAWODOWYCH NA POSTRZEGANIE PRZEZ STUDENTÓW ICH WIEDZY I PRZYSZŁEJ PRACY W SEKTORZE AGROBIZNESU

Key words: paid internship, professional career, agribusiness, perception of knowledge and its role

Słowa kluczowe: staż płatny, kariera zawodowa, agrobiznes, postrzeganie znaczenia wiedzy i edukacji

JEL codes: I23, I25, J24, J43

Abstract. The paper presents the results of research on the impact of paid professional traineeships done by students during their studies on the perception of knowledge they have gained, as well as on agribusiness as their work environment and their further professional career. The aim of the research was to evaluate paid traineeships as a factor determining the way in which the knowledge gained by students during studies and their future work are perceived. The research material included the results obtained in a study of students conducted twice – before and after they had completed their professional traineeships. The research tool was the auditorium questionnaire, and the collected data underwent a statistical analysis, followed by a discussion. It was found that the respondents appreciated work placements as a way of gaining experience during studies. At the same time, the results of the investigation indicate that in the students' opinion, graduating from a good university guarantees finding an interesting job. This was additionally confirmed by disagreeing with the statement that gaining good grades in the course of university studies does not bring any benefits (as indicated by the gamma correlation coefficient). Thus, completing a traineeship is significant for a future professional career, as it allows the students to look at it more realistically, including the financial aspect. However, their expectations, both before and after the work placement, remained relatively high, compared to the actual earnings reported in the University Graduates' Economic Future monitoring system (ELA).

Introduction

The socio-economic reality of the 21st century strengthens a relatively new tendency on the labour market, which is the shift from an employer's market to an employee's market. As a result, recruiting entrepreneurs face a shortage of candidates despite a large number of applications. On the one hand, this situation can be described as a labour market paradox and explained with a more selective recruitment on the employers' part, in the conditions of a difficult market situation [Górniak 2014]. The degree of this selectiveness depends on the demand for employees who are equipped with necessary knowledge and skills, able to achieve full work efficiency in a short time, and do not need to be invested in [Budnikowski et al. 2012]. On the other hand, the candidates entering the labour market re-assess the subjective benefits brought by education, by developing a higher self-esteem, increasing their career aspirations and life ambitions, or expecting to achieve professional fulfilment [Piróg 2013]. The co-occurrence of these two attitudes at the moment of recruitment results in specific economic consequences for both parties. It also evokes a debate about the effectiveness of the educational system at Polish universities, as well as how well graduates are prepared to enter the labour market. Using external financial support and often in cooperation with employers, universities are trying to respond to the needs of the market by organizing internships and traineeships for students. The author of this paper analysed the effects of this type of activity, evaluating a student internship

project run at the Economics and Social Studies Department, at Poznań University of Life Sciences (PULS), entitled “You’re studying – get some practise”¹. Attention was focused on the beneficiaries of the program, i.e. MA students who gained additional knowledge about HR management in organizations, as part of a class module dedicated to them. The main research question was: How do paid work placements influence the perception of a future career and the factors determining success on the labour market? The author attempted to provide an answer by using a wide range of research tools typical of social studies and referring to the studies of other authors as well as his own.

Material and methods

The empirical research was conducted by means of the auditorium method in 2017 (before traineeships) and in 2018 (directly afterwards). The questionnaire was a modified version of the tool suggested for similar research by Henryk Król and Antoni Ludwiczynski [2008]. The participants of the research were students of Economics; in the first year, there were 66 respondents and in the following – only 51 from the original group. It should be stressed that participation in the research was anonymous and voluntary. The majority of respondents were women (tab. 1). The sex structure of the sample reflects the structure of the general population, which confirms the feminization of economic university studies.

An introductory description of the sample showed that a large majority of respondents undertook gainful work during studies. Thus, they were very active with regards to acquiring professional experience and gaining financial means for living during studies, away from home. The description was extended with a question about the rationality of working while studying. The response was mostly positive, although slightly over 17% full-time students included in the survey indicated the need to focus exclusively in studies. Regarding the preferred form of work, it was concluded that it did not make any difference to the majority of respondents, similar to when they were asked about voluntary work.

Table 1. The survey sample structure

Specification	Before traineeship (n = 66)	After traineeship (n = 51)
Sex		
Female	89.4	86.3
Male	10.6	13.7
Did you work for money during your studies?		
Yes	72.7	82.4
No	27.3	17.6
Should full-time students work at the same time?		
Yes	47.0	45.1
No	25.7	17.6
I do not know	27.3	37.3
What kind of work do you prefer?		
Team	36.4	21.6
Individual	30.3	37.2
Does not matter	33.3	41.2
Would you be willing to work during studies without being paid, as a voluntary worker?		
Yes	30.3	13.7
No	30.3	47.1
I do not know	39.4	39.2

Source: own study

Research results

The challenges facing university graduates include acquiring knowledge, skills and social competences required by potential employers. When it comes down to acquiring knowledge, this process involves mainly university studies, while practical skills can be learnt and improved by following the curriculum of the studies on a given course and, at the same time, by doing traineeships or internships offered by the school, which are often paid. For some respondents, it was also important to combine study with gainful work, usually due to their family or personal situation.

In order to achieve the aim of the research, the author prepared a list of 13 statements, which underwent evaluation using the 5-point Likert scale, where 5 means “I agree with the statement”, 3 – “I do not know”, and 1 – “I disagree with the statement”. The statements concerned external

¹ A project co-financed from European Union means, as part of the European Social Fund and the Operational Programme Knowledge, Education, Development (Priority Axis III Higher education for the economy and development activities 3.1). Implementation period: 1 September 2016 - 31 August 2018.

factors influencing the labour market in Poland, as well as the respondent's own, subjective choices.

Considering the variety of responses, the highest diversity was found with regard to statements 2, 6 and 11 (changeability coefficients $>50\%$), and the lowest – statement 8 (changeability coefficient $<20\%$). In order to establish whether work placement had an impact on the evaluation, a detailed analysis of the acquired formal knowledge was carried out. For this purpose, the U Mann-Whitney test and Wald-Wolfowitz series test were applied. The results of the former did not show any statistically significant diversity of responses. In contrast, the latter displayed significant differences between the responses with regard to statement 10 ($p = 0.029$). This means that students who have completed work placements are convinced that they are well prepared to work. The detailed analysis of the study results included the data regarding the value of the median and the mode. As regards the value of the mode, it was found that the lowest value (5 – “I agree”) in the study conducted before work placement dominated in statements 5 and 8, while in the study conducted afterwards – also in statements 5 and 8, as well as 10 and 12. Therefore, it should be concluded that in the respondents' opinion, the study curriculum should be focused on practical knowledge rather than on theory, and that the university should help their best graduates to find their first job. This is certainly what universities do through the Career Bureau, actively searching for job offers for graduates, as well as through Work Fairs, held annually at the Natural Science University, as well as additional internships and work placements financed with money from operational programs or institutions like NCBiR (National Centre for Research and Develop-

Table 2. Statements describing the perception of the studied factors by students

Statement	Before traineeship			After traineeship		
	mean	median	standard deviation	mean	median	standard deviation
The university diploma guarantees finding an interesting job	3.24	4	1.33	3.18	4	1.28
Graduates from large cities have better chances on the labour market	2.48	2	1.43	2.29	2	1.20
Joining the EU by Poland created new career perspectives for young people	4.15	4	0.98	3.98	4	0.97
It is impossible to get a good job without connections	3.03	3.5	1.12	2.92	3	1.35
The university should help its best graduates to find the first job.	4.08	4	1.06	3.90	4	1.24
If I were taking my final high school exams this year, I would choose different studies	2.53	2	1.45	2.82	3	1.58
A graduate with work experience and knowledge of a foreign languages will easily find a job, even during recession	3.89	4	1.10	3.96	4	1.09
University studies curriculum should focus on practical skills rather than theory	4.48	5	0.88	4.53	5	0.88
I know what to do to get my dream job and I am consistently striving for it	3.27	4	1.18	3.57	4	1.02
When I think about the approaching end of studies, I worry about my future.	3.88	4	1.10	3.67	4	1.41
The purpose of holidays is to rest, not work	2.24	2	1.25	2.45	2	1.32
I cannot imagine my life without working	3.74	4	1.19	3.92	4	1.26
Fighting for good grades during studies is not worth the effort; employers fail to pay attention to it	3.05	3	1.27	3.41	4	1.25

Source: own study

ment), just as it is the case at the Economics and Social Studies Department.

From the point of view of organizing the educational process, it is worth emphasizing that respondents are generally satisfied with the studies they have chosen. It is confirmed by the high values (mean, median) of the statement that the university diploma guarantees finding an interesting job, as well as the low rating of statement 6 – “If I were taking my final high school exams this year, I would choose different studies”.

Keeping in mind that studying Economics at PULS are heavily feminized, the author additionally conducted a statistical analysis of the impact of sex, followed by gainful work during studies on the evaluation of the statements. The analysis showed a statistically significant influence of the respondents' gender on the evaluation of statement 13 (“Fighting for good grades during studies is not worth the effort”) in the study before the placement, while in the study conducted after the placement, the impact of gender on the allocated points was not significant. Taking into consideration the influence of gainful work, the author confirmed the significance of this factor with reference to statement 2, 4 and 11 (“Graduates from large cities have better chances on the labour market. It is impossible to get a good job without connections and the purpose of holidays is to rest, not work”) in the study before the placement, as well as statement 3 (“Joining the EU by Poland created new career perspectives for young people”) and 10 (“When I think about the approaching end of studies, I worry about my future”) in the study conducted after the placement. The results indicate a change in the perception of future work by respondents and the key factors on the competitive labour market.

It was also interesting to observe whether there are any relationships between individual statements. In order to establish the strength and direction of those relationships, the gamma correlation coefficient was used (tab. 3).

The results presented in Table 3 show a larger number of relationships between individual statements in the study conducted after completing work placements by students.

Table 3. The results of analysis concerning the relationships between individual statements

Statement No	After traineeship												
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1													
2	-0.242*												
3	0.238	-0.100											
4	-0.014	0.029											
5	-0.082	0.307*											
6	-0.030	0.081	-0.006										
7	0.129	-0.059	0.113										
8	-0.131	0.130	0.132										
9	0.368*	-0.192	0.045										
10	-0.066	0.136	-0.180										
11	0.004	0.169	-0.053										
12	0.263*	0.053	-0.071										
13	-0.241	0.097	-0.034										

*significant statistical correlation $\alpha < 0.05$

Source: own study

This is confirmed by statistically significant gamma correlation coefficients. The relationship between statement 5 "The university should help its best graduates to find the first job" and statement 8 "University studies curriculum should focus on practical skills rather than theory" is particularly worth emphasizing (0.714). In the study conducted before work placements, the relationship between these statements was statistically insignificant and very weak (-0.06). The placement obviously made the respondents aware of the importance of these aspects. Interesting results were also provided by the analysis of correlation coefficients regarding statement 13 ("Fighting for good grades during studies is not worth the effort; employers do not pay attention to it") and the statements presented below, particularly statement 1 "The university diploma guarantees finding an interesting job", because a negative statistically significant correlation was found, both before the work placement (-0.241) and afterwards (-0.545). This points to the fact that the respondents were convinced about the high value of their university diploma in the eyes of employers and disagreed with the statement that obtaining good grades during the studies is not worth the effort. Moreover, the author found a negative correlation with an average strength of relationship for statements 3 and 9, as well as a positive correlation with an average strength of relationship for statements 4 and 5. At this point, it is worth stressing that also in the case of statement 8 ("University studies curriculum should focus on practical skills rather than theory"), it was observed that the strength of the relationship had increased from an average (0.381) before the work placement was completed to high (0.506) afterwards, which means that in the respondents' opinion, practical knowledge and skills which the graduate can use at their workplace are more important than very good grades on the diploma.

Another issue approached in the study was the recognition of financial expectations regarding future work after graduating from university. First, the respondents were asked what net earnings would persuade them to undertake work during studies as a source of additional income. A large majority of the respondents quoted the net sum of PLN 1,500-2,000, while the expected average salary before the work placement was PLN 1,576 and afterwards – PLN 1,848. During the study, the respondents were asked to indicate what net earnings would persuade them to abandon studies. The results show that 16.7% (before undertaking work placements) to 27.5% (after work placement) of the students claimed that no salary would persuade them to stop their studies. The average net salary which might persuade the respondents to resign from studies was PLN 3,559 and PLN 3,804 PLN, respectively.

Interesting information was also provided with regard to net earnings that a graduate should receive. According to the respondents, both before and after the work placement, they should fall within the PLN 2,500-3,000 range (the calculated mean was PLN 2,614 and PLN 2,799, respectively). The expectations of future graduates are undoubtedly high, and reality is not as optimistic as the ELA reports might suggest. According to ELA, the average monthly earnings from all sources in 2016 was PLN 2,554.97 gross (ca. net PLN 1,851). The report shows that the net salary expected by the respondents was achieved by only 20% of already working graduates.

Conclusions

In the conditions of the changing labour market, especially with regard to the shift from an employer's market to an employee's market, it has become important to recognize the way this market is perceived by students before and after doing paid work placement. At the same time, indirectly, the author attempted to assess the actual impact of the work placement program, run by the Economics and Social Studies Department at PULS, on the students' attitudes to searching for jobs. The aim of the research was to evaluate paid work placement as a determinant of perceiving the students' knowledge and their future work. Its results are not representative, but are an important contribution to a discussion about the university's involvement in the future career of its graduates. The results show that students not only appreciate traineeships, but also become convinced that the diploma of the university where they study may guarantee them

an interesting job. Their opinion on the sense of fighting for good grades during studies also changes considerably.

It should be concluded that paid traineeships are an important tool to verify students' attitudes to university studies and their future work. It is confirmed by research conducted earlier by the authors of this article [Kozera-Kowalska, Uglis 2017], as well as other authors [Chirkowska-Smolak, Jarosław Grobelny 2015].

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Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest ocena staży odbywanych przez studentów w trakcie studiów o charakterze płatnym jako determinanty postrzegania zarówno wiedzy zdobytej w toku studiów, jak i przyszłej pracy. Materiał badawczy stanowiły wyniki zgromadzone w toku dwukrotnego badania studentów, tj. przed i po odbyciu stażu. Jako narzędzie wykorzystano ankietę audytoryjną, a uzyskane dane poddano analizie statystycznej, której wyniki poddano dyskusji. Stwierdzono, że badani studenci doceniają staże jako źródło zdobywania doświadczenia w trakcie studiów. Jednocześnie wyniki badań wskazują, że w opinii badanych dyplom dobrej wyższej uczelni gwarantuje zdobycie interesującej pracy, co dodatkowo potwierdziło zaniegowanie stwierdzenia o braku korzyści ze zdobywania wysokich ocen w trakcie studiów (na co wskazuje współczynnik korelacji gamma). Okazało się, że dla przyszłej kariery zawodowej istotne odbycie stażu, który urealnia spojrzenie studentów na przyszłe życie zawodowe, w tym w jego aspekcie finansowym. Same jednak oczekiwania w tym zakresie, zarówno przed, jak i po odbyciu stażu, pozostały na wysokim poziomie w stosunku do raportowanych w systemie ELA faktyczny zarobków absolwentów.

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