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The frontier university graduates in the labour market

Introduction

Recent decades represent a time of extremely intense changes in all areas of life. These changes affect universities as well. The knowledge developed there has become a pillar of socio-economic progress. Education has taken on a mass character. The university started to be perceived as a market institution, which should be subjected – like all others – to the principle of competitiveness. As a result, the management principles featuring commercial institutions became widespread in it (Pokorska, 2020, p. 66). All this led to economic instrumentalism, to measures turning the ‘invisible’, related to the cultural mission of the university, elite education, into the ‘visible’, quantifiable (Macheridis, Paulsson, 2021, p. 79), in order to justify public investment in science and academic education. Indicators permitting the comparison of universities and the creation of numerous rankings have been introduced. One of the indicators in the area of educational quality is employability. Students themselves have also become more interested in employability due to the increasing competitiveness of the labour market for graduates. Finally, employers have begun to promote a greater focus on employability owing to a perceived lack of job-related skills and competencies among graduates (Byrne, 2020).

Employability can be defined in many ways. It has also many dimensions and determinants. What attracted our attention was the employability of the frontier university graduates. We wanted to find out: What types of activities do graduates of these universities engage in? What remuneration do they receive for their work? Does the border location differentiate the situation of graduates from those who graduate from universities located in the centre?

According to a dictionary definition, a frontier denotes a borderland and an edge. Its synonyms, or perhaps rather near-synonymous words, include such terms as: shore, verge, outskirts, borderland, balk or dividing line. Frontier is a rather broad concept. It is a zone that separates a given area, and also defines, on the one hand, the end and, on the other hand, the beginning (Bański, 2010, pp. 489–490). Moreover, frontier indicates an area of tactical and strategic importance. It is also an extremely important

terrain during wartime which acquires a completely new meaning today¹. Therefore, the frontier is a place of diversity, opportunity, yet also a dangerous place, where paths cross, cultures intermingle, the beginning meets the end, where conflicting aspirations clash, where blood is easily ‘poured’. In addition, the frontier refers back to the centre, to the middle. In turn, the latter is identified with strength and with power symbolically structuring the rest of the world. The frontier is not just a geographical concept. It is also rich in symbolism. It can be applicable in many contexts. Edward Stachura wrote about being lost in the wild frontiers of time and space (1969, p. 20). The authors are aware of the multitude of ways to understand the category of the frontier. The study considers the concept in several ways. Firstly, it is included in a literal, geographical sense as a strip of land along the border of a country. Frontiers are also perceived metaphorically. Metaphorical meanings of borderlands were revealed in the course of the conducted analyses. We will elaborate on it further in the text. Given the geographical understanding of the frontiers, the following universities were included in the analyses: one university located along the northern border – the University of Warmia and Mazury, two universities situated in the cities along the eastern border: the University of Białystok, the University of Rzeszów, one university placed along the southern border – the University of Opole, and two universities localised along the western border: the University of Szczecin and the University of Zielona Góra. In order to compare the situation of frontier graduates, data relating to university graduates from the centre: the Warsaw University, the Jagiellonian University and the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań were also included.²

The analyses made use of the existing data. Two data sources were used. The first one was the National System for Monitoring the Economic Fate of University Graduates (Pol.: ELA). The second source was the data collected by the Academic Career Service of the University of Szczecin and made available to the authors of the text.

Semantic context

A reference to the meaning of the frontier could be found in the introduction. However, the semantic context highlighted in the structure of the text at this point is not about the frontier but rather about the meaning of the term which is crucial for the present study, namely, employability.

Employability has a long history dating back to the beginnings of the 20th century, but its purpose and meaning have been remodelled (Stoten, 2018, p. 12). This

¹ <https://sjp.pwn.pl/slowniki/rubie%C5%BC.html> (3.07.2022).

² Compare the study in the following volume: A. Korzeniecka-Bondar, M. Czerepaniak-Walczak, E. Bochno, *Działalność naukowa i artystyczna uniwersytetów na rubieżach (analiza na podstawie danych z Systemu RAD-on)*.

remodelling proceeded from a dichotomous concept (employable and unemployable people), in the first forty years of the past century, to an interactive concept (interaction between subjective and non-subjective factors), since the mid-1980s (Wiśniewska, 2015, pp. 12-13). Economic crises put an end to the social democratic model of social policy, and the emphasis was placed on competitiveness. The governments of Western countries, especially that of the UK, pressured universities to undertake pilot initiatives promoting employability among graduates (Stoten, 2018, p. 12). The movement towards increasing the requirements for higher education in terms of employability continues up to the present day, and applies to Polish colleges and universities.

The employability itself is a complex, multidimensional category, understood in a variety of ways. One can identify at least three approaches to framing it:

- the subjective approach, which focuses on personal strengths, such as skills, attitudes or qualities expected by employers,
- the object-oriented approach, in which employability is defined by the labour market; these are the chances of finding and maintaining employment,
- the subject-object approach, in which employability is interpreted as self-movement across the labour market and the use of individual attributes as well as their adaptation to the employment context; it is not a state, but a process that depends on internal and external factors (cf.: Cheng et al., 2022, Clarke, 2017).

In the text, a subject-object approach to employability has been adopted, taking into account external and internal factors interacting with each other.

Legislative context

Employability was an important goal of the Bologna process. It was also one of the main aims to be achieved in the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) (Bologna beyond (Bologna beyond 2010, 2009). According to the report prepared by the European University Association, a high level of graduate employability is one of the most important driving forces behind changes introduced in the educational programmes of all higher education institutions (Crosier, Purser, Smidt, 2007, pp. 6–7).

Planning and implementing employability measures requires the recognition of the scope of the indicated phenomenon, and thus the monitoring of the fate of graduates. The majority of Polish universities started monitoring the fate of their graduates only as a result of a statutory requirement. According to the amendment to the Law on Higher Education, of October 1, 2011, all higher education institutions were required to monitor the professional fate of their graduates (Paculska, 2014, p. 207). The inclusion of the results of this monitoring by higher education institutions in their educational offer has become one of the criteria for institutional evaluation by the Polish Accreditation Commission in terms of adjusting the university's curriculum

proposal to the needs of the labour market. Another amendment to the Act (dated 11th July 2014), placed the obligation to monitor the careers of graduates on the minister responsible for higher education (Art. 13b. 1). It said that monitoring was to be carried out on the basis of data collected by the Social Insurance Institution (Art. 13b. 2). The said regulations were maintained in the Law on Higher Education and Science. Article 352 stipulates that monitoring is carried out on the basis of data contained in the POL-on System and collected by the Social Insurance Institution on the accounts of insured persons or contributors (Journal of Laws 2018, item 1668. The Ministry commissioned the development of the electronic system called the Economic Fate of Graduates,³ which obtains data from the sources indicated in the Law: from the administrative resources of the Social Insurance Institution – data regarding, inter alia, the professional situation of graduates: employment, unemployment, remuneration, and from the POL-on system – information on, among other things, the education of university graduates.

The university can conduct its own monitoring of graduates' careers in order to adapt the study programme to the needs of the labour market. Most universities take advantage of this opportunity through academic career offices (Pol.: ABK), which have already been established and developed their own ways of operating and collecting data on the fate of graduates.

It is worth noting that academic career offices are institutions that constitute part of the labour market. The Law on Employment Promotion and Labour Market Institutions defines them as units acting for the professional activation of students and graduates of higher education institutions, run by higher education institutions or student organisations. Their tasks include:

- providing students and graduates of a higher institution with information about the labour market and opportunities for improving professional skills,
- collecting, classifying and making available job, internship and apprenticeship offers,
- maintaining a database of university students and graduates interested in finding jobs,
- helping employers attract suitable candidates for vacancies and professional internships,
- providing support in active job search (Act, 2004).

Academic career offices are therefore one of the ways in which the labour market is entering the university, trying to subject it to its rules while simultaneously supplanting the cultural mission. These offices may be a kind of frontier with all its dynamics, tensions and contradictions.

³ Pol.: ELA, <https://www.ela.nauka.gov.pl/pl>.

Advisory context – based on the activities of the Academic Career Office at the University of Szczecin

In Poland, academic career offices operate in most academic centres. They are associated in an informal, nationwide network. Their status may be indicated by the fact that there has been a Commission for Academic Career Offices at the Conference of Rectors of Academic Schools in Poland (CRASP) since October 2015. It performs a number of activities related to the creation of conditions for modern dialogue between universities and the economy as well as the provision of support to students in their path to the labour market, including the organisation of seminars, training courses, conferences, workshops. The Commission presents recommendations on the activities of career offices on its website⁴ and displays a wide range of materials for use in the functioning of the said offices.

The analysis of the employment data collected by EUROSTAT clearly shows that tertiary graduates in the countries of the European Union consistently reach the highest employment rate. It was 85.0% in 2019 for the entire Union. Then it declined in 2020, with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021 it rose again, and at the level of 84.9% it was again almost at the same level as before the pandemic.⁵ The situation in Poland reflects the general trend related to the dependence of employment on the level of education, the employment rate is higher than the EU average and approaches 90% (Mokrzycka, 2019).

All in all, the generally rather good situation of graduates in the labour market does not change the fact that there is a need to provide students and graduates with career counselling aimed at helping them enter the labour market and find suitable employment. The so-called career guidance is actually provided by academic career offices. The activities they undertake are targeted at the future ‘after graduation’ and are intended to support students in designing and pursuing educational and professional careers (Nymś-Górna, Sobczak, 2018, p. 116).

The Academic Career Office [Pol.: ABK] operating at the University of Szczecin undertakes many activities to support students and graduates in choosing their career path and finding employment that meets their expectations, aspirations and qualifications. They include:

- maintaining a regularly updated database of job, internship, apprenticeship and volunteer opportunities,
- preparing free workshops and training courses, also in cooperation with companies and institutions,
- organising internships and apprenticeships for students,

⁴ <https://dobrepraktykiabkblog.wordpress.com/standardy-dzialalnosci-abk/>.

⁵ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/>.

- providing free access to publications, guides and handbooks related to the labour market and personal development,
- individual consultations while preparing application documents (CV and cover letter),
- monitoring the careers of the University's graduates,
- providing career counselling using personality tests and psychological opinion,
- co-organising job fairs and exchanges,
- publishing a weekly newsletter containing, among other things, offers for students and graduates.⁶

While analysing the 2021 report made available for research purposes, it can be concluded that the Office takes part in the implementation of the university-wide project 'UNIVERSITY 2.0 – CAREER ZONE 2018–2022' co-financed by the European Union under the European Social Fund, offering students a wide range of activities to prepare them for functioning in the labour market. In 2021, a significant number of students participated in ABK activities, within the framework of individual actions, of an advisory and educational nature, related to the project:

- US competence academy (workshop classes) – 24 students,
- A training voucher (reimbursement of external training/workshops up to the amount of PLN 2,000, in total PLN 294,482.49) – 163 students,
- a polyglot student (specialised language courses at a level not lower than B2) – 114 students;
- Actively Build Your Career (services to assist students in getting started in the labour market – career counselling) – 705 counselling sessions.

The Virtual Job Exchange at the University of Szczecin is worth noting. It is organised as part of the cross-border Interreg project implementation (181): 'University Meets Business. The Polish-German Innovation Campus'. It is a pilot project, whose partners are: the University of Szczecin, Hochschule für nachhaltige Entwicklung Eberswalde, Hochschule Stralsund, Unternehmervereinigung Uckermark e.V. Such a project is made possible by the cross-border location of the University of Szczecin, a frontier location. An analysis of the spatial localisation of human economic activity types on an international basis is used here. The relationship between economics and politics is taken into account. Geopolitical and profit-making strategies in a cross-border environment are built and developed (Cf.: Potulski, 2010, p. 100).

⁶ <https://abk.usz.edu.pl/zadania-abk-us/>.

Economic context

The situation on the labour market in Poland has been favourable for employees in recent years. Since the beginning of 2017, the unemployment rate has been steadily declining, and the market seems particularly favourable to those employed in large cities (Cf.: Dolot, 2018, p. 287). At the end of December 2020, the rate was 6.3% for the whole country. In Cracow it was only 3.1%, in Poznań 2.0%, and in Warsaw only 1.8 (<https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/rynek-pracy/bezrobocie-rejestrowane/bezrobotni-zarejestrowani-i-stop-a-bezrobocia-stan-w-koncu-grudnia-2020-r-,2,101.html>). It is interesting to note how the labour status of the frontier university graduates is developing against the indicated background. The data from the ELA system for 2020 on different types of labour force participation and unemployment are included in Table 1.

Table 1. Types of professional activity of second degree graduates in the average month in the first year after graduation (data for 2020)

University	Types of professional activity (in %)					unemployment*
	work					
	in total	tenure	no tenure	economic activity	work and studies	
Frontier universities						
The University of Warmia and Mazury	71,7	59,7	13,2	3,5	2,4	9,0 (10,2)
The University of Białystok	68,7	57,2	14,6	2,0	2,8	8,6 (7,8)
The University of Rzeszów	69,5	55,6	18,6	2,7	1,9	11,6 (9,1)
The University of Opole	73,9	65,7	17,7	2,6	2,7	5,8 (6,9)
The University of Zielona Góra	79,8	70,2	11,6	4,8	2,8	5,0 (6,3)
The University of Szczecin	72,5	61,0	15,2	3,5	6,4	5,7 (8,4)
The universities 'in the centre'						
The University of Warsaw	70,3	57,0	14,5	5,4	6,2	3,3 (4,4)
The Jagiellonian University	63,5	50,7	15,1	4,2	6,9	5,0 (5,3)
The Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań	74,2	63,6	13,6	4,0	8,1	3,7 (3,7)

* The unemployment rate for a given voivodeship at the end of 2020 is given in brackets; (<https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/rynek-pracy/bezrobocie-rejestrowane/bezrobotni-zarejestrowani-i-stop-a-bezrobocia-stan-w-koncu-grudnia-2020-r-,2,101.html>, 1.07.2022).

No aggregation of data up to 100% as graduates may undertake different activities at the same time.

Source: own analysis based on data from the ELA system.

The labour market situation of the frontier university graduates is diverse. Between 68.7% (the University of Białystok) and 79.8% (the University of Zielona Góra) of second-degree graduates found employment in the first year after graduation. Regardless of the place of study, more than half of them take up a full-time job. Only a small percentage of graduates choose to run their own businesses (from 1.9% – graduates of the University of Rzeszów to 4.8% – graduates of the University of Zielona Góra).

There are no sharp differences between the situation of the frontier university graduates and those who studied at the largest universities, constituting academic centres. The fact that the Jagiellonian University graduates (63.5%) have the lowest percentage of working graduates may come as a surprise. However, this does not mean that the unemployment is the highest among the said graduates. On the contrary, it is even at a level slightly lower than in the region. The low level of employment may be explained by the fact that the graduates of the said university include the largest number of those who continue their studies. This will be highlighted in the next table (Table 2).

The percentage of the unemployed second-degree graduates in the first year after graduation at the frontier universities is close to the unemployment rate for a given voivodeship. In the case of graduates of the universities of Białystok and Rzeszów, it is slightly higher than the rate for the voivodeship, and slightly lower for the remaining universities. The Warsaw University is featured by the smallest number of unemployed people (3.3%), and their percentage is even lower than the unemployment rate for the voivodeship (4.4%). This rate at the other universities in the centre is also lower (the Jagiellonian University) or equal to the rate for the entire voivodeship (the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań). It is worth noting that the employability of graduates of particular universities is related to the privileged position of a particular city and voivodeship (Macinson, 2012, p. 40). Besides the university's or the graduate's perpetration, the social and structural conditions construed by the state, local governments and the economy are also important.

Educational decisions made after graduation are also important for the employment situation of graduates. Those who study are less willing than others to take jobs. In addition, further studying after obtaining a degree is important for the functioning of graduates in the labour market. Data relating to the activity of graduates from the frontier universities and those from the universities located 'in the centre' are included in Table 2.

Table 2. Educational activity of second degree graduates in the average month in the first year after graduation (data for 2020)

University	Educational activity (in %)	
	studying	combining work and studies
Frontier universities		
The University of Warmia and Mazury	4,5	2,4
The University of Białystok	7,3	2,8
The University of Rzeszów	5,0	1,9
The University of Opole	5,4	2,7
The University of Zielona Góra	4,8	2,8
The University of Szczecin	13,1	6,4
The universities 'in the centre'		
The University of Warsaw	15,0	6,2
The Jagiellonian University	17,1	6,9
The Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań	16,0	8,1

Source: own analysis based on data from the ELA system.

The educational activity of second-degree graduates in an average month in the first year after graduation is not high. Further studying involves no more than 8.0% of graduates, and combining work and study is even rarer. No more than 3.0% of graduates are working and studying at the same time. Graduates of the University of Szczecin are an exception. Among them, 13.1% continue to study, and 6.4% combine work and studying. In this respect, graduates of the University of Szczecin come close to graduates of universities 'in the centre'. This is because these ones more often than their fellow students at the frontier universities continue studying and combine their studies with work. Therefore, one can take the risk of saying that the location of the university 'in the centre' fosters the continuation of studies. Basing on the data included in the ELA system, one finds it difficult to perceive the reasons for the said differences in educational and professional choices. However, it seems that the statements included in the report of *the European University Association* of 2007 that the ideas of lifelong learning were developed rather on the periphery of academic activities, and were not incorporated into the central elements of university strategy (Crosier, Purser, Smidt, 2007, p. 60) are still valid.

The situation of university graduates in the labour market is also expressed through the amount of the earnings they get immediately after receiving their diploma. Data in this regard are included in Table 3.

Table 3. The ratio of average gross earnings of second-degree graduates to average earnings at their place of residence in the average month in the first year after graduation (data for 2020)

University	Ratio of average gross earnings of graduates to average earnings in the place of residence
Frontier universities	
The University of Warmia and Mazury	0,68
The University of Białystok	0,55
The University of Rzeszów	0,63
The University of Opole	0,72
The University of Zielona Góra	0,80
The University of Szczecin	0,63
The universities 'in the centre'	
The University of Warsaw	0,78
The Jagiellonian University	0,72
The Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań	0,71

Source: own analysis based on data from the ELA system.

If one looks at the situation of graduates in the labour market from the perspective of the ratio of graduates' earnings to the average earnings in their place of residence, it can be concluded that the situation of graduates of the University of Warsaw, that is, located in the centre, is slightly better than that of the frontier university graduates. The graduates of the University of Warsaw earn 78% of the average earnings at their place of residence. In contrast, the earnings of the frontier university graduates are slightly higher than half of the average income at their place of residence. The graduates of the University of Zielona Góra are an exception, earning proportionally even more than the graduates of the University of Warsaw. It constitutes 80.0% of the average at the place of their residence. It can be considered whether the indicated situation is related to tailoring the educational offer to the local labour market and to the possibility of taking jobs in the Lubuski Industrial and Technological Park, in which the shareholders are: Zielona Góra Municipality – 39%, Lubuskie Voivodeship – 30%, the University of Zielona Góra – 30% and Kostrzyn-Słubice Special Economic Zone – 1%.⁷ The earnings of the graduates of the Jagiellonian University and Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań are at the level of the earnings of the graduates of the Opole University. If one

⁷ https://www.paih.gov.pl/strefa_inwestora/parki_przemyslowe_i_technologiczne/zielona_gora#.

considers the data on the amount of earnings of the graduates who worked full-time or were self-employed before their studies, then one can see that their earnings are higher. With regard to graduates of the University of Zielona Góra and the University of Warsaw – their earnings exceed 90% of the average earnings in the place of residence.

During the data analysis, a certain regularity loomed out which to a limited extent was related to the main focus of the research. Namely, there is a large disproportion between the number of male and female university graduates of the second degree programme. It applies both to the frontier universities and those ‘in the centre’. Women very clearly dominate among the graduates. The largest disproportion in terms of the gender of graduates concerns the University of Białystok (80.0% women and 20.0% men) and the University of Opole (83.0% women and 17.0% men). The smallest difference in the number of male and female graduates was found at the University of Zielona Góra (58.0% female and 42.0% male). Therefore, it can be concluded that in the light of the collated data, the typical worldwide regularity that women are statistically – compared to men – graduates of universities with less prestige is not confirmed. However, the thesis of women’s educational emancipation and the fact that men are in a definite educational defensive position is confirmed (Cf.: Gromkowska-Melosik, 2015).

Instead of the ending

The conducted analyses, pertaining to the situation of university graduates in the labour market, provoked several questions that relate to employability of not only those who study at frontier universities.

To what extent is the university supposed to operate for the benefit of the labour market, preparing skilled workers ready to take on responsibilities, and to what extent is it supposed to operate for the benefit of the personal development of graduates preparing them to assume various social roles, including professional ones?

Isn’t educating for the needs of the labour market an education for what exists, or even for what is no longer available, in a situation where we have to deal with the incredible volatility, uncertainty and unpredictability of the world, and thus – the (global) labour market?

How are universities supposed to implement the idea of employability, when it depends on a number of factors, including the macroeconomic ones, which are far beyond the university’s reach, and the university’s ability to act in this regard is severely limited?

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Abstract

Recent decades have been a time of unusually intense changes taking place in all areas of life, including the higher education institutions. One direction of change is economic instrumentalism. According to it, universities and other higher education institutions are perceived and treated as institutions of the market. Their performance is evaluated on the basis of ‘measurable’ indicators that will justify the expenditure of public money. One such indicator is employability.

The purpose of the chapter is to study the situation of the frontier university graduates in the labour market and to search for answers to the following questions: what types of activities do graduates of these universities engage in? What kind of remuneration do they receive for their work? Does the frontier location make the situation of graduates different from those who graduate from universities located in the centre?

The analyses were based on the existing data. Two data sources were used. The first one is the National System for Monitoring the Economic Fate of University Graduates (Pol.: ELA). The second source is data collected by the Academic Career Service of the University of Szczecin and made available to the authors of the text. Taking into account the geographical understanding of the frontier, the following universities were considered in the analysis: the University of Warmia and Mazury, The University of Białystok, the University of Rzeszów, the University of Opole, the University of Szczecin and the University

of Zielona Góra. Thus, in order to compare the situation of the frontier university graduates, the data pertaining to graduates of the universities representing the centre – the Warsaw University, the Jagiellonian University and the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań – were also included.

Keywords: university, frontiers, employability