THE ROLE OF THE STATE SCHOOL OF HIGHER PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION IN ELBLAG IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE WARMIA AND MASURIA REGION*

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Abstract

In recent years, dominated by change, institutions related to knowledge-based economy have become more and more important for the development of cities and regions. Knowledge and innovation are seen as a potential which, effectively used, can lead to a competitive advantage. The role of higher professional schools in these changes is unquestioned. They are institutions responsible for shaping the human capital and production of knowledge. As research centres, they constitute main hubs of economic growth, around which spheres of technology, business and trade may form. In many regions of Poland they are also major employers.

In this article, the attempt is made to show the influence that higher professional schools may have on a city’s or region’s development. The case study presents the example of The State School of Higher Professional Education in Elbląg, in which both authors of the article lecture.

Keywords: region development, higher professional education

Introduction

The regional issue is one of the most important elements included in the development policy. Development of the region is of interest to a variety of stakeholders, including politicians, representatives of local authorities as well as the residents themselves. Undoubtedly, regional development is becoming a complex process. Regions are seen as the networks of changes of the modern world: economic, social, political and cultural [Weeb, Collins, 2000, pp. 857-864]. This is due to a number of objectives, which the development aims to achieve, activities that shape it, and a combination of resources and production factors, which determine the region's economic relations with its environment.

Competition of particular regions in the markets is dependent on the ability to take advantage of their specific potentials, i.e. on actions taken by public authorities, which must

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take into account the activities of other stakeholders that have an impact on the development processes in the area. At the same time each territory has its own, often very diverse set of attributes, that make up the potential for development, which is the key factor for growth [Gawronski, 2011].

Nowadays, it is knowledge that becomes a resource which, if used effectively, can lead to gaining a competitive advantage. The optimum added value is obtained when the knowledge is accompanied by innovation [Pawlowski, 2009]. Individual entrepreneurship, innovative businesses, education of citizens, scientific research and transfer of knowledge and technology are some of the most important factors in the growth of the region. Among them, as many as four depend on the quality of higher education and research institutions operating in the area or working for the city or region [Pawlowski , 2007]. Thus, for the region to be able to "exist" in the new environment, it must become a learning region, which will function as a storehouse of knowledge and ideas, constituting a source of innovation and a driver of economic growth [Florida, 2001, pp. 255-277 ].

**Higher School as an institution of knowledge-based economy.**

With the Lisbon Strategy and the report of the OECD [Perch-Horodyńska, Piech, 2005, p. 111] the term knowledge-based economy, which appeared in the 1990s, became widespread. In the literature there are many definitions. The first was formulated by A. Kozminski, according to whom "knowledge-based economy is the economy in which there are many businesses that rely on the knowledge of its competitive advantage" [Kozminski, 2001]. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines knowledge-based economy as "an economy that is based directly on the production, distribution and use of knowledge and information" [Onak-Szczepanik, 2011].

P.F. Drucker (1994), in turn, identifies knowledge-based economy as "economic order in which knowledge, not labour, raw materials or capital, is a key resource; social order, for which social inequality based on knowledge is a major challenge; and a system in which the government cannot solve social and economic problems."

Thus, knowledge-based economy is a description of the modern economy in which knowledge is understood as the ability to act, which plays a crucial role in stimulating economic and social development of each region [Matusiak, 2005, pp. 57-59]. Therefore, with the development of economy, the way in which universities influence the environment is also changing. Currently, the role of the university is most frequently considered in four dimensions, where the university is seen as [Boucher, Conway, Meer, 2003, pp. 887-897]:

- an economic unit,
- a producer of knowledge,
- a human capital training institution,
- an institution that is a "regional actor".

Seen from the level of the economic unit, the university becomes a "buyer" of products and services from local businesses as well as an institution attracting students. At the same time it becomes an important institution in the region due to its investment activities, involving, among others, the construction and modernization of buildings, laboratories,
research parks and other facilities associated with the necessary infrastructure. Hence, in many regions it can be not only a major employer for researchers but also for employees engaged in the non-academic work on campus. This has an impact on employment in the region, which translates into higher income and local GDP [Boucher, Conway, Meer, pp. 887-897].

Universities are also the "producers" of knowledge, both of the applied (applied research) and the theoretical (basic research) [Colyvas, Crow, Gelijns, Mazzoleni, Nelson, Rosenberg, 2002, pp. 61-72]. New knowledge created in regional universities is of benefit to the region or the city and is associated with the development of technological innovation. Higher education institutions are seen as a link between creators and consumers of knowledge of the field, and, with the effective transfer system of this knowledge, they can aid the companies of the region, local government, community organizations as well as the residents themselves.

The place of human capital formation are universities. Education is the main source of human capital, which can be defined as the sum of the potential of generating skills for learning. Well-educated labour resources are not only the means for the implementation of innovation, but in themselves are an innovative potential [Proniewski, 1996, p. 34]. Functioning in the twenty-first century means living in a world of constant social, economic and cultural changes. The reality, which is the result of the globalization of the economy, development of civilization, demographic trends, and the scientific and technical progress, is changing. Requirements are growing in almost all workplaces, new jobs are increasingly forcing workers to adapt to new technologies and the changing organization of work, and a competitive market expects initiative and creativity. All these factors result in the education and skills quickly becoming outdated. There is, therefore, a need for their follow-up, acquisition of new knowledge and skills. This gives one a chance not only to maintain the current job, but also to take up a more satisfying job. Continuous learning allows realising one's own aspirations and needs, pursuing passions and interests and gives a sense of accomplishment.

Institutions of higher education as "regional actors" also have an impact on the environment by becoming engaged in social and economic development of the region. They do not limit their involvement only to the relationship with companies. Involved not only in the creation and management of innovation in the local area, they also participate in decision-making and often serve as a moral authority or act as a mediator in conflicts at the regional level.

Often, the functioning of the university produces a variety of effects in the spatial layout and provides an impulse for development of the city’s infrastructure [Benneworth, Hospers, 2007, pp. 99-198]. Apart from material dependencies between the university and the region, non-material ones can also be seen. Some universities are an important element of the brand of the region and thus build the region’s image in distant surroundings [Lisiecki, 2006, pp. 221-235].

Case study
State Schools of Professional Education were created by the Act of 26 June 1997 on Higher Vocational Schools [Journal of Laws, 1997, No. 96, item. 590] which are a new type of universities, providing professionally oriented education at undergraduate, engineer and graduate levels. The stimulus for their creation lay in the demographic and economic situation of the 90s of the last century. Poland then had to deal with an excess of university candidates, who appeared as a result of the coexistence of three variables: the baby boomers, growing ambitions of society and major academic institutions being too slow to adapt to the new expectations of the educational market.

Universities of this type are not only centres of education for young people but also important centres of cultural creativity, stimulating the development of cities and the local community. Among the examples of culture-oriented actions, one can list numerous symposia, public lectures on various fields, initiating scientific societies, academies for children, university of the third age, etc.

In Poland, there are 36 public universities of professional education. Most of them are located 50 - 100 km from large academic centres. Their goal is to educate professionals needed in the local labour markets. These schools were created to meet the public as well as industrial demand [Garbarczyk, 2014]. State colleges train in a way which is closely tailored, i.e. a faculty is constructed to meet the needs of, for example, the largest factory in the region and the needs of the region. Based on market analysis, the schools create specialties and later courses of study that will be needed in the regional markets.

The State School of Higher Professional Education (PWSZ) in Elbląg is an institution of higher education offering vocational undergraduate courses lasting from 6 to 8 semesters leading to a B.A. or B.Sc. Eng. degree. All of the courses on offer in the four Institutes combine theoretical content with extensive professional training conducted in co-operation with a wide variety of business and educational institutions. The graduate is thus prepared both to undertake a professional career and to enter graduate courses in order to obtain an M.A or M.Sc. degree.

PWSZ is part of the state educational system and intramural studies are free of charge, with scholarships available for students in need of financial support as well as for outstanding students. The School aims to employ lecturers of highest academic standards. The fundamental principle of higher vocational education is preparing the graduates for the demands of the local labour market. PWSZ in Elbląg takes into consideration the needs of the community by focusing on those fields of study that contribute to easing the local labour market problems as well as providing the graduates with job opportunities.

The School prepares future employees and local-employed professionals by balancing purely academic and theoretical education with practical and professional training. This strategy is aided by close contacts with business organisations, public institutions, self-government and administration bodies of all levels. By active participation in the social and economic life of the town and region, the School hopes to be not only an educational institution but also an important research and development centre.

This intention lies at the basis of the strategic objective of the School, which is the development of IT education by creating new IT courses at the Institute of Information Technology and also by enriching the existing courses with IT issues.
PWSZ in Elbląg and the Municipal Office have created a Technological Park, an IT Centre with the aim of stimulating the development of the region by virtue of implementation of latest technologies. Situated in a medium-sized town, The State School of Higher Professional Education in Elbląg enjoys universal support of local and regional organisations, business and administrative. The conditions of studying and the quality of organisation make the School an attractive choice for students.

In the face of a rapidly changing labour market and the growing importance of information and information technology, lifelong learning is becoming an important driver of economic growth based on a highly qualified staff. Globally, an aging population will require the opportunities to update their technical, professional and academic knowledge. A very important task for educational institutions (at all levels and in all sectors) is to equip European Citizens with the competencies needed to build a knowledge society - a more flexible and mobile one.

In this process, higher education institutions play not only the special role of innovation centres, where new knowledge is created and discovered, but also have a great potential to serve the society by organizing formal learning processes and recognising informal and non-formal learning, and by providing support in the selection of continuous learning paths. A very important element of this process is the proper identification of all participants. An attempt was made to systematize information on the various elements of the current educational offer provided by PWSZ. In the near future, the university authorities are willing to transform PWSZ in Elbląg into a LLL centre with a wide educational offer, well-recognized in the region.

Through the analysis of the current educational offer addressed not only to the "classic" students, different types of learners were identified who are, or could in the future become the recipients of the services provided by the State Higher Vocational School in Elbląg.

Understanding the motivations and expectations of learners through interviews and questionnaires conducted with the participants of the current courses allowed the isolation of several target groups potentially interested in the school’s offer:

- persons wishing to complete their education in order to obtain full qualifications - these are usually people already employed. Not always is the professional profile compatible with the chosen teaching programme or course offered by PWSZ,
- returnees, who for a time worked professionally, but decided to return to university - these are usually people who do not work,
- persons wishing to retrain and find a better job,
- persons wishing to develop their competence for their own needs, not directly related to the professional life.

The most important motivation that has been identified by the respondents was the opportunity for personal growth. Those wishing to supplement their competence often showed not only the desire to obtain a degree in a specific academic field but also mentioned the knowledge and skills needed in everyday life. A special group of learners are those who wish to acquire highly specialized knowledge, which is a very demanding group that is highly motivated to achieve success.
Motivation of learners will be the basis for defining specific objectives in the strategy of The State School of Higher Professional Education in Elbląg, for revising programmes so that they meet the needs and expectations of the various target groups. In 2014, within the framework of the project of the Institute for Educational Research INTEGRATOR, PWSZ in Elbląg carried out a survey among 1403 respondents. The aim of the study was to identify the needs of the respondents in relation to the School's offer. On the basis of interviews, surveys of participants in individual courses, key elements have been identified that can condition the effective development of LLL activities. These include:

- widely available, clear information on the existing offer and the principles of its operation,
- the possibility of recognition of skills acquired via prior experience, not only professional but also general,
- support from employers - possibility of flexi time work and employers' support in the learning process,
- funding - development of mechanisms of financial support for learners.

On the basis of these proposals, a preliminary formulation of strategic and operational objectives, presented in Table 1, was possible.

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<tr>
<th>Strategic objective</th>
<th>Operational objective</th>
<th>Examples of tasks</th>
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<tr>
<td>PWSZ in Elbląg university open to the needs of the whole society</td>
<td>Expanding the scope and accessibility of higher education for all ages</td>
<td>Current analysis of the needs of learners</td>
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<td>Continuous improvement of the quality of education in all forms of learning.</td>
<td>Continuous review of the existing offer</td>
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<td>PWSZ as a centre to promote the development of entrepreneurship in the region</td>
<td>Networking with companies and institutions supporting entrepreneurship in the region</td>
<td>The creation of a consortium to promote local entrepreneurship</td>
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<td>Creation of an offer of courses or trainings which allow partial supplementation of learners' competences</td>
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<td>Development of training programs leading to awarding full qualifications in business management.</td>
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<tr>
<td>PWSZ as a centre of cultural development of the community and the surrounding Elblag region</td>
<td>Cooperation with local cultural institutions</td>
<td>Creating a common educational offer with cultural centres</td>
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<td>Patronage of local artists and integrating them in university activities</td>
<td>Creation of new small forms of learning based on the general development of cultural competence</td>
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<th>PWSZ as a centre of innovation development</th>
<th>Cooperation with local businesses operating in the field of R &amp; D</th>
<th>Creating an offer for highly qualified personnel - specialist management courses, courses on new technologies, etc.</th>
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<td>Cooperation with foreign academic institutions and exchange of good practices</td>
<td>Inclusion of the university staff in international projects concerning support of innovation in the academic and extra-academic community.</td>
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The model of cooperation with institutions (Fig.1.) was based on the conclusions of surveys conducted among internal and external stakeholders. The area of cooperation between the institutions, determined by the same goals, may be:

- common client / an unemployed person/ a person at risk of social exclusion/ an excluded person/ student / employee,
- training program / course / workshop,
- employment in accordance with obtained qualifications

**Common client** - exchange of information concerning individual clients / potential employees is very important in setting up cooperation in the field of professional training. It is crucial that all market participants have the widest possible knowledge of their client / potential employee. This knowledge should be shared. For this purpose, the Integrator team proposes the creation of so-called information platform that is accessible to all users of the system. Rules of access and data update (in conformity with law) will enable effective management of resources and human capital.
Fig.1. The model of cooperation between The State School of Higher Professional Education in Elblag and active institutions in the region

The training program, a course or workshop form - will guarantee the achievement of the intended aim of the training. Classes will be effective and attractive in their form in relation to demand, which will increase opportunities for the acquisition of new competencies by the participants.

In this model, external stakeholders report their need for skilled workers, presenting in this way their job offers. These are mostly directed to: District Labour Office in Elblag, The Municipal Social Welfare Centre in Elblag and various non-governmental organizations as well as local government institutions. These centres analyse the reported requirements, which results in the stakeholders gaining information about the possibility of their needs being met. There are several solutions:

1) institutions have in their databases persons who meet certain employers' requirements; job offers are directly presented to those persons,
2) institutions have in their databases people who do not fully meet the employers' requirements, and therefore they have to complete qualifications,
3) Databases include people who are willing to find employment, but they do not have the required qualifications.

In the second and third case, the institution may indicate to the interested persons the possibility of obtaining a full qualification which meets the requirements stated in job advertisements. One of these possibilities is to indicate The State School of Higher Professional Education in Elblag as a place, where they could complete and / or obtain the expected qualifications.

In response to the needs, The State School of Higher Professional Education in Elblag:
   a) prepares a programme of various forms of training, e.g. a course, a training, workshops, postgraduate courses etc., which are consulted with external stakeholders (a group of employers),
   b) shows offers of different forms of professional education currently offered by the School.

This model also provides the possibility of direct contact of external stakeholders with The State School of Higher Professional Education in Elblag in order to organize the necessary forms of training for a larger group of employees, thereby shortening the search for opportunities for improvement.

The proposed model is characterized by:
   - territoriality - may be used at both local level and regional levels,
   - process - cooperation and compatibility of institutions and enterprises, aiming to initiate and develop services for social and professional reintegration,
   - universalism - applicability in the area of each unit of local government in the country
   - openness - ability to modify and adapt to local institutional resources, human and financial, as well as to local social needs. New partners can join in the model at any time provided they follow the model's terms.

**Conclusion**

The role of the State Higher Vocational Schools in regional and local development is beyond doubt. They are responsible not only for the "production" of knowledge, research and scientific activities but also for the formation of human capital - called "knowledge workers" and "information".

The State School of Higher Professional Education in Elblag has become one of the Warmia and Masuria research centres, constituting a key element in economic growth and potentially attracting technology, trade and business.

This is particularly important in the modern market economy, where knowledge used effectively can lead to achieving competitive advantage both by the city of Elbląg and by the region [Przybyszewski, 2007, s.98.]. The example of The State School of Higher Professional Education in Elblag confirms that even a young, only 16 year-old school, may have an impact on the development of Elbląg and the region, where it carries out tasks as a unit of educating human capital, producer of knowledge and economic unit.
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