

TRANSITION OF UNIVERSITY OF SILESIA GRADUATES INTO THE LABOUR MARKET IN THE PERIOD BEFORE AND AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Purpose: The aim of this article is to show the situation of graduates of the University of Silesia in Katowice in the transition from the education system to the labour market in the period before and after the Covid-19 pandemic.

Design/methodology/approach: This article presents the results of a survey (quantitative online research) that was conducted one year after graduation among graduates of the University of Silesia. The results of surveys conducted among graduates graduating in the 2016/2017 academic year (N = 845) and in the 2020/2021 academic year (N = 908) were compared.

Findings: Empirical studies have shown that graduates who graduated in the pre-pandemic period were better prepared to be function in the labour market than graduates whose period of study fell during the pandemic. Pre-pandemic graduates were more likely to report that they had knowledge of where and how to look for a job and where to work after graduation, and were more likely to work.

Research limitations/implications: A key limitation of the study is that not all graduates take part in this type of survey, which makes it difficult to aggregate data to the levels of individual fields of study. It should be recommended to continue the research on the professional fate of graduates of higher education institutions - however, it can be postulated that the research methodology should be extended to include qualitative research, e.g. focus group interviews with graduates. It can also be postulated to carry out research among employers who employ graduates.

Social implications: Improving the methodology of researching the professional fate of graduates will have an impact on better adjustment of the fields of study to the needs of the labour market.

Originality/value: The article shows how the unprecedented situation of the pandemic negatively affects the preparation of young people to get into the labour market. It shows the differences between graduates graduating before the Covid-19 pandemic and graduates who studied during the pandemic in terms of the transition from the education system to the labour market. The article is addressed to those interested in labour market issues - in particular the issue of youth transition from the education system to the labour market.

Keywords: transition, graduate, labour market, Covid-19 pandemic, vocational activation.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

The literature on the subject clearly emphasizes the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a very unfavourable impact on young people in the job market (Maksim, 2021, p. 21). It should also be noted that cyclical economic crises also adversely affect young people in the job market (see: Muster, 2020). They are particularly exposed to the problem of precarity (Standing, 2014, 2015). The difficulty for young people, including university graduates, in adapting to the job market structures and the lack of stable employment have many negative consequences, both individually and socially, that should be considered. In recent years, unemployment in Poland has clearly decreased, which has generally improved the situation of employees and those seeking suitable employment. On the other hand, it is problematic - especially for young people without professional experience - to find a place on the primary labour market, in companies and institutions that offer a sense of stability, good financial remuneration and opportunities for professional development.

Undoubtedly, among the activities that may improve the situation of graduates in the job market is cyclical monitoring of their professional careers and examining the demand for human resources qualifications, which could constitute the basis for modifying the study programme in individual fields. Piróg points out that research relating to the entry of university graduates into the job market does not have a long tradition. It was only when the problem of unemployment among university graduates deepened that researchers became interested in this topic (Piróg, 2013, p. 132). Przybylska has a similar opinion, emphasizing the short tradition of research on the issue of transition. At the same time, she emphasizes the importance of transition periods (including from the education system to the job market) in human lives (Przybylska, 2022, p. 23).

2. Problems in the transition of university graduates to the job market

Gabriela Wronowska notes that: 'Young people are convinced that obtaining higher education will translate into a better position in the job market' (Wronowska, 2015, p. 118). Meanwhile, the reality is different. While we can talk about the availability of job offers in the secondary (worse) job market, finding a job in the primary (better) job market is significantly more difficult. Limiting opportunities for effective entry into the job market has numerous negative consequences that should be considered in their individual and social dimensions. As emphasized in the literature on the subject, this is particularly because 'it turns out more and more often that having a diploma does not necessarily guarantee obtaining an attractive job and a satisfactory income' (Grotkowska, Gaik, 2019, p. 31). An example of this is a significant

increase in the share of unemployed people with higher education. According to Statistics Poland data, in 2003 year, 4.4% of the unemployed had a tertiary education, in 2013 this percentage increased to 12%, and in 2023. to 14.4% (<https://bdl.stat.gov.pl/>). However, it should be emphasized that the problem of long-term unemployment affects young people with a university degree to a limited extent. These people are characterized by high vocational and spatial mobility.

The literature on the subject stresses that the modern job market is variable (Szaban, 2013, p. 299; Zaleszczyk, Kot, 2017), mainly because of technological progress (Duda, 2014, p. 303). This situation undoubtedly affects the need to constantly adapt the supply of labour resources to the rapidly changing demand for human resources qualifications, which of course also applies to graduates, including university graduates.

In the discourse on the role of universities in modern society and their importance for the country's economic development, the question of combining educational fields with the needs of the job market increasingly arises. There is a discussion on the desired programme model of studies, and a fundamental question arises: what should a university be like? What should be the proportion between theoretical and practical education for students? Regardless of this discussion, people undertaking studies ask themselves how much their diploma will mean in the job market and to what extent the knowledge acquired during their studies will enable them to find a suitable job.

The literature on the subject clearly emphasizes that currently, students do not study for the sake of acquiring knowledge, but to obtain a diploma and thus increase their attractiveness in the job market, which will ultimately affect their earnings and professional careers (Jeruszka, 2011, p. 1; Grotkowska, Gaik, 2019, p. 31). Therefore, an effective transition from the education system to the job market becomes crucial for university graduates. Piróg points out that 'Transition is a polysemous term, derived from the English word "transition", which in the context of the job market, refers to the process of people who complete a selected level of education entering the market' (Piróg, 2013, p. 131). It should also be stressed that this term is used in various sciences (Drabik-Podgórna, 2010, p. 93). However, in the context of the work environment, it should be noted that:

The process of transition from education to work is becoming an increasingly important development task and its course is determined not only by the conditions and resources of the environment, but also by complex intrapsychic regulatory mechanisms (Hauziński, 2015, p. 145).

Bohdan Rózanowski was among the first researchers in Poland to use the term 'transition' in the context of young people's movement from the education system to the job market (Piróg, 2015, p. 37). As Piróg notes, the current process of graduates' transition into the job market is unstable, long-lasting or deferred in time (Piróg, 2015, p. 39).

Undoubtedly, the process of effective transition is influenced by both internal (human capital) and external factors (situation in the job market, general economic situation). In addition, we should not forget the social capital of people entering the job market. A network of connections, acquaintances and recommendations facilitates the process of effective entry into the job market.

3. Methodological note

The empirical part of this article presents the results of surveys on graduates in the job market carried out by the Career Office of the University of Silesia in Katowice. To capture the dynamics of changes in their graduates' situation, research results relating to people who graduated from the University of Silesia in the 2016/2017 and 2020/2021 academic years are compared. In both cases, the surveys were conducted one year after graduation. Therefore, the survey with 2016/2017 graduates was conducted in 2018 and with those from the 2020/2021 academic year in 2022. The article shows potential differences between graduates who entered the job market before and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

An online survey questionnaire was used to collect empirical material. The survey questionnaire was delivered electronically to those graduates who, at the end of their studies, agreed to participate in this study and registered in the Alumni Database. In the 2016/2017 academic year, 6,809 students graduated from the University of Silesia. However, a total of 845 respondents took part in the study conducted in 2018, which constituted 12.4% of all graduates. In the 2020/2021 academic year, 4,674 students graduated from the University of Silesia and 908 people took part in the study conducted in 2022, which constituted 19.4% of all graduates. The vast majority of surveyed graduates completed full-time studies, constituting 81.4% of 2016/2017 respondents and 89.8% of 2020/2021 respondents.

4. Graduates' opinions about their knowledge of job search

Graduates who took part in the survey indicated whether they had general knowledge of issues related to entering the job market. Analysis of the collected empirical material has shown that more graduates from the 2016/2017 academic year participating in the survey more often claimed to know where and how to look for a job, than graduates from the 2020/2021 academic year. While 65% of 2016/2017 graduates declared that they knew where and how to look for a job (the sum of the answers 'definitely yes' and 'somewhat yes'), only 51.3% of 2020/2021 graduates were of this opinion (Figure 1).

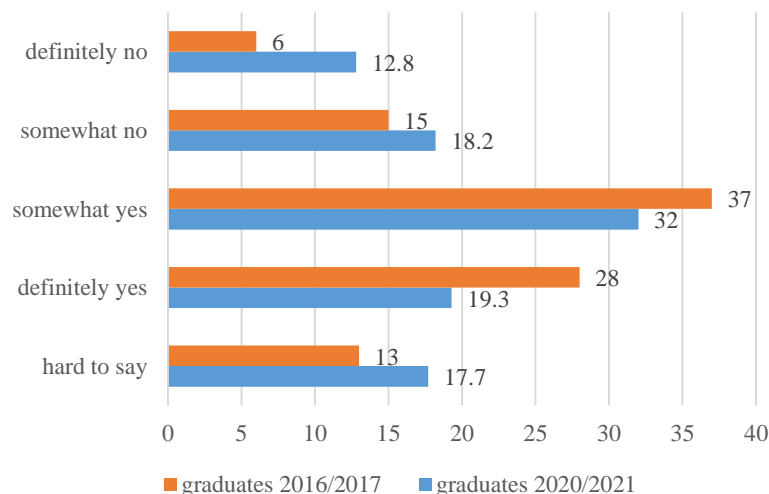


Figure 1. Division of surveyed graduates by the declared level of knowledge on where and how to look for a job (in %).

Source: Research by the Career Office of the University of Silesia (2016/2017 graduates – N = 841; 2020/2021 graduates – N = 908).

Moreover, the level of declared knowledge of the requirements set by employers was higher in the case of the 2016/2017 graduates, amounting to 50%, than that declared by 2020/2021 graduates, which decreased to 47.3% (the sum of the answers ‘definitely yes’ and ‘somewhat yes’) (Figure 2).

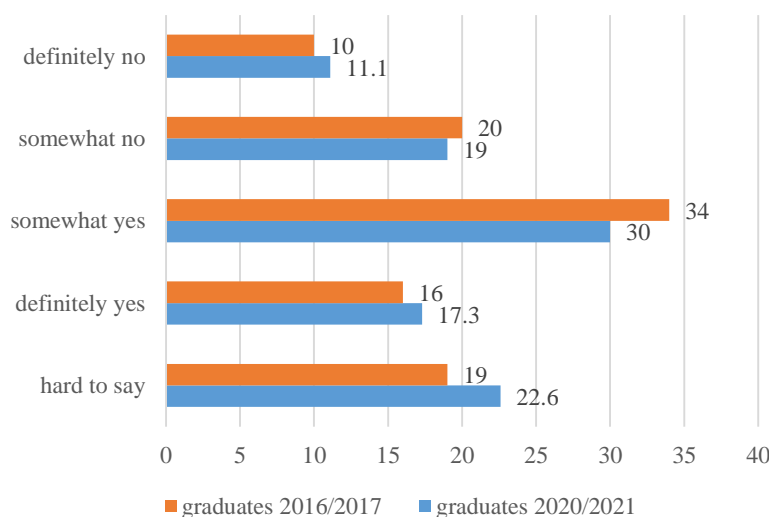


Figure 2. Division of surveyed graduates by the declared level of knowledge about employers' requirements (in %).

Source: Research by the Career Office of the University of Silesia (2016/2017 graduates – N = 841; 2020/2021 graduates – N = 908).

Comparing the results of these two groups of university graduates (2016/2017 and 2020/2021), one notices a decrease in the share of people who declared knowing what job positions they could take up after graduation. It turned out that 79% of graduates from the

2016/2017 academic year and 64.7% of 2020/2021 graduates declared that they knew what job positions they might take up after graduation (Figure 3).

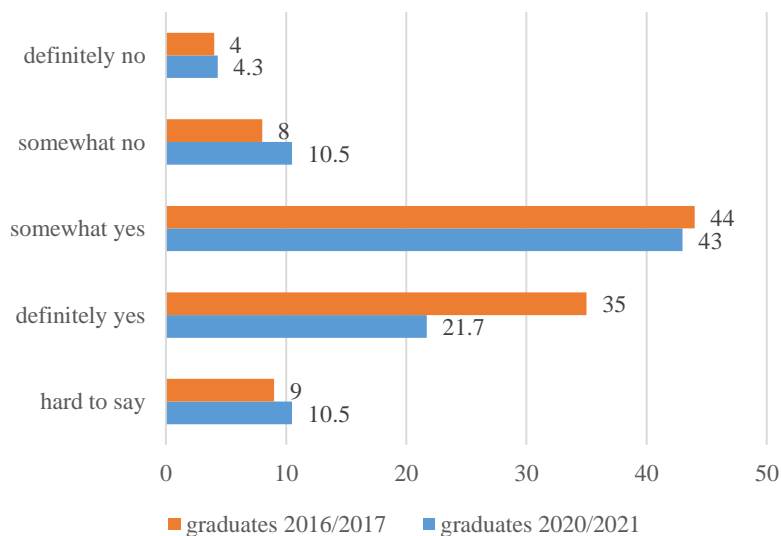


Figure 3. Division of surveyed graduates by the declared level of knowledge about the job positions they could take up after graduation (in %).

Source: Research by the Career Office of the University of Silesia (2016/2017 graduates – N = 843; 2020/2021 graduates – N = 908).

There were no significant differences between the answers of 2016/2017 and 2020/2021 graduates regarding the declared level of knowledge in identifying companies that might be their potential employers. Seventy per cent of graduates from the academic year 2016/2017 and 69.7% of 2020/2021 graduates gave positive answers (the sum of the answers ‘definitely yes’ and ‘somewhat yes’) (Figure 4).

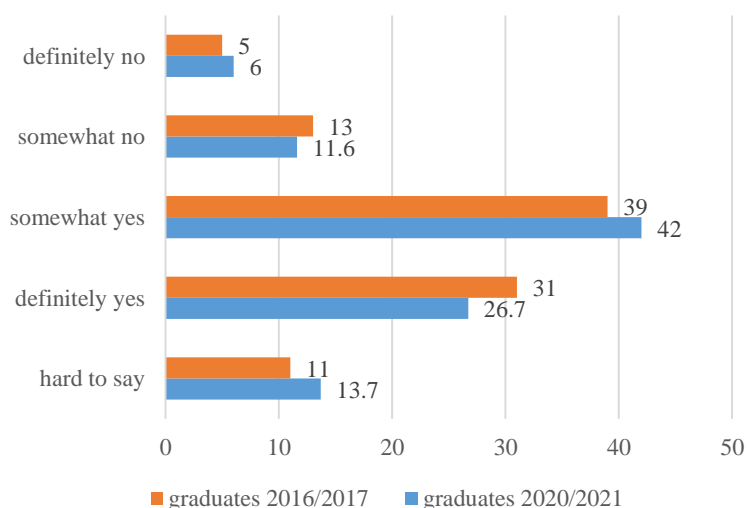
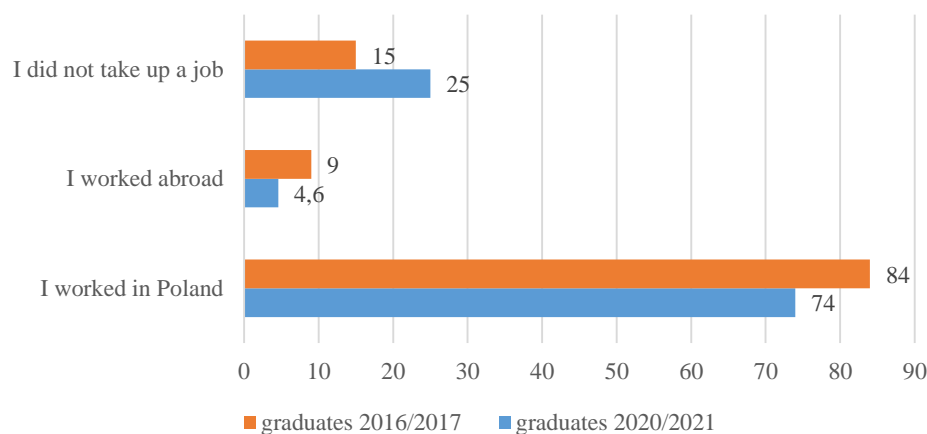


Figure 4. Division of surveyed graduates by the declared level of knowledge about the companies that might be their potential employers (in %).

Source: Research by the Career Office of the University of Silesia (2016/2017 graduates – N = 842; 2020/2021 graduates – N = 908).

5. The activity of graduates in the job market during their studies

Analysis of the collected empirical material has shown that most respondents were active in the job market during their studies. However, 2016/2017 graduates were more active in this area than those from the academic year 2020/2021. Only 15% of the surveyed 2016/2017 graduates did not take up work during their studies and this percentage increased significantly to 25% in the case of 2020/2021 graduates. Most often, they were employed in Poland and less often abroad (Figure 5).



Note: The results do not add up to 100% as more than one answer was possible.

Figure 5. The activity of the surveyed graduates in the job market during their studies (in %).

Source: Research by the Career Office of the University of Silesia (2016/2017 graduates – N = 845; 2020/2021 graduates – N = 908).

The survey showed that most often people who worked during their studies (both in Poland and abroad) performed work unrelated to their field of study. However, it is worth noting that many respondents performed work related to their field of study: 38% of 2016/2017 graduates and 36% of 2020/2021 graduates. Some respondents also decided to take up internships, extra-curricular internships or volunteering during their studies.

6. The job market status of graduates

During the surveys carried out one year after graduation, 85% of graduates from the 2016/2017 academic year and 88% of 2020/2021 graduates worked or ran their own business. Analysis has shown that 15% of 2016/2017 graduates and 12% of 2020/2021 graduates were unemployed at that time (Figure 6).

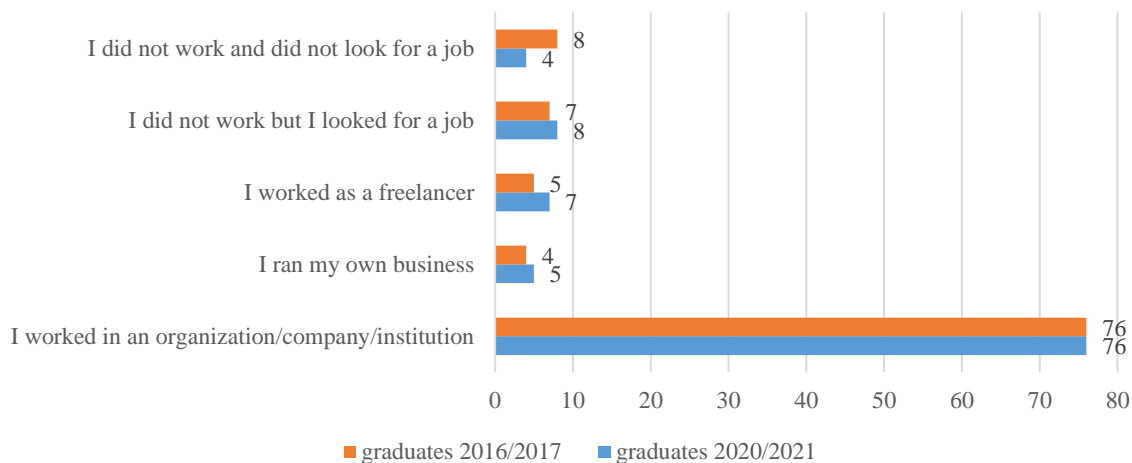
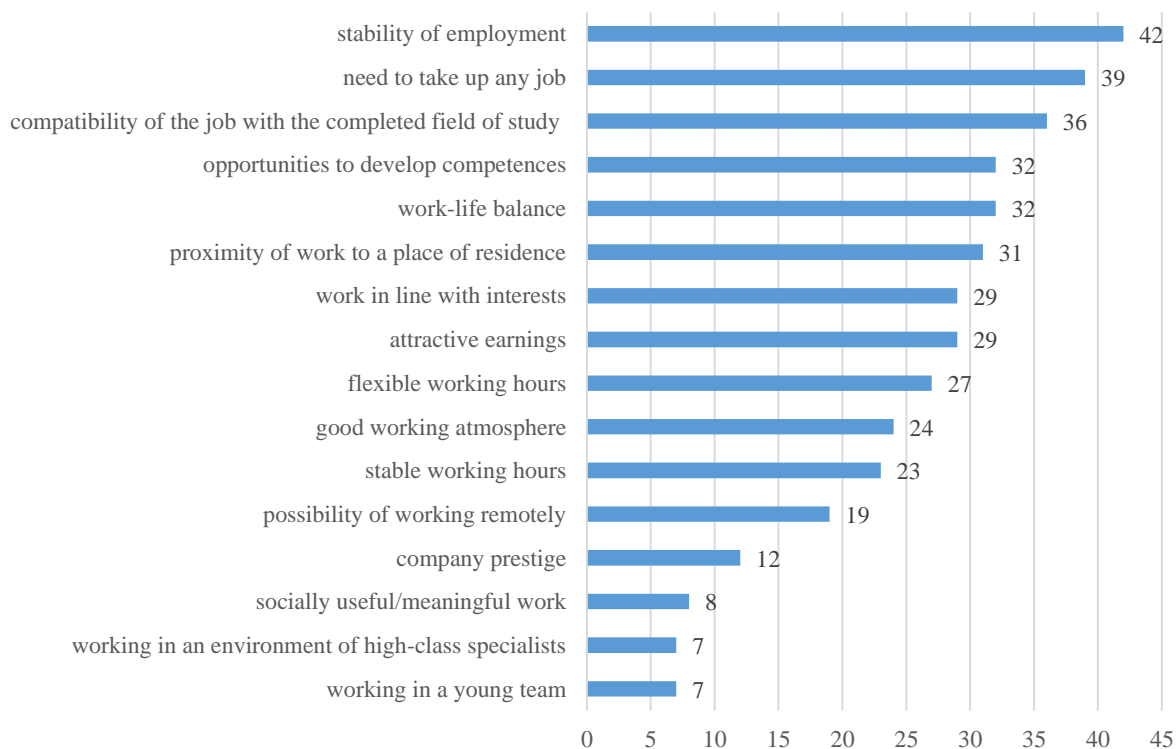


Figure 6. Job market status of surveyed graduates (in %).

Source: Research by the Career Office of the University of Silesia (2016/2017 graduates – N = 845; 2020/2021 graduates – N = 908).

Additionally, during the survey carried out in 2022, working graduates were asked about the key factors that influenced the choice of their current jobs. The respondents' indications are presented in Figure 7.



Note: The percentages do not add up to 100 because respondents could indicate a maximum of three answers.

Figure 7. Factors influencing the 2020/2021 graduates' choice of their current jobs (in %).

Source: Research by the Career Office of the University of Silesia (2020/2021 graduates – N=660).

The most important factors influencing the choice of the current job were: stable employment, the need to take up any job, compatibility of the job with the completed field of study, opportunities to develop competences and combining professional work with non-professional roles (work–life balance).

Analysis of the collected empirical material indicates that graduates who were active in the job market and worked in organizations were primarily employed in entities located in the Śląskie Voivodship (82% of 2016/2017 and 82% of 2020/2021 graduates). Moreover, 14% of 2016/2017 graduates and 15% of 2020/2021 graduates worked in other voivodships in Poland. However, 4% of 2016/2017 graduates and 3% of 2020/2021 graduates worked abroad.

7. Sources of information about job offers

Respondents who indicated that they were active in the job market and worked in an organization were asked how they found job offers. Figure 8 contains their detailed answers. Graduates from the academic years 2016/2017 and 2020/2021 who were active in the job market most often indicated the following sources of information about job vacancies: job portals, family/friends, direct contact with an employer and company websites.

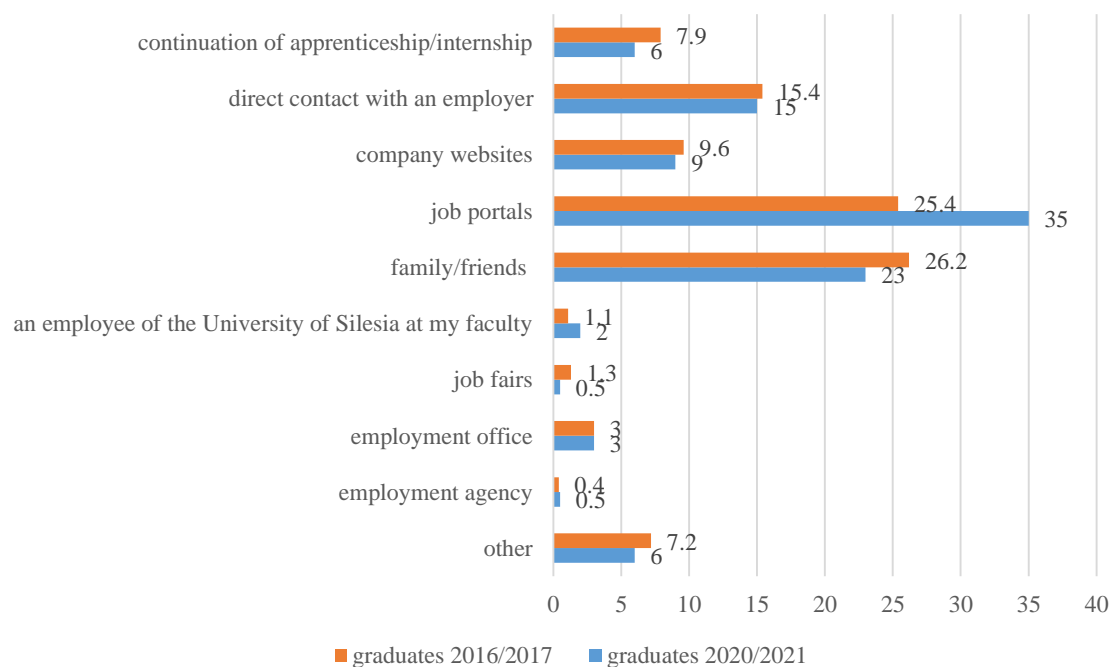


Figure 8. Source of information about job offers indicated by graduates working in companies and institutions (%).

Source: Research by the Career Office of the University of Silesia (2016/2017 graduates – N = 469; 2020/2021 graduates – N = 659).

A detailed analysis of respondents' answers has shown that an increasing share of graduates working in organizations obtained information about job vacancies from the internet (company websites or job portals). Moreover, a decreasing percentage of graduates found a job thanks to direct contact with an employer or through family/friends.

8. Graduates as entrepreneurs and freelancers

Graduates working as entrepreneurs mostly started their businesses after graduation. This answer was given by 68% of each group of respondents. However, 2016/2017 and 2020/2021 graduates working as freelancers most often started their businesses during their studies. Comparing 2016/2017 graduates to 2020/2021 graduates, this percentage increased by 4% and amounted to 50% (Figure 9).

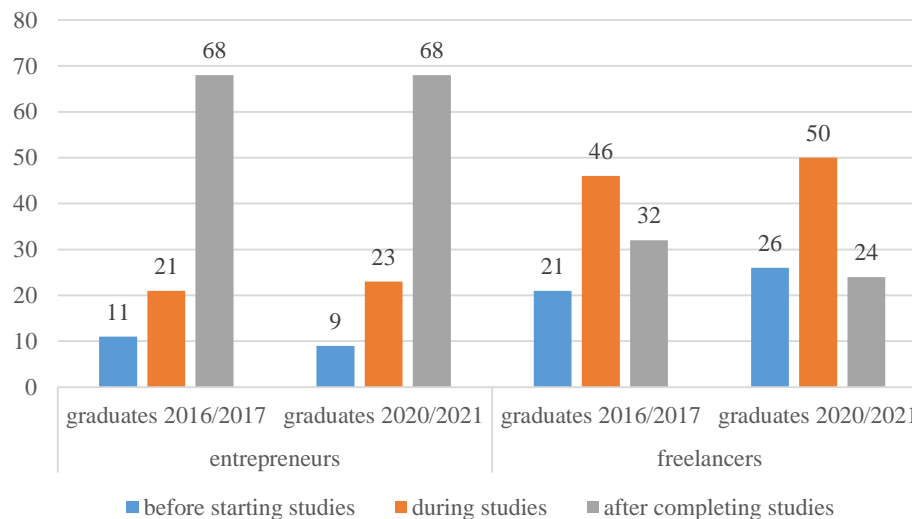
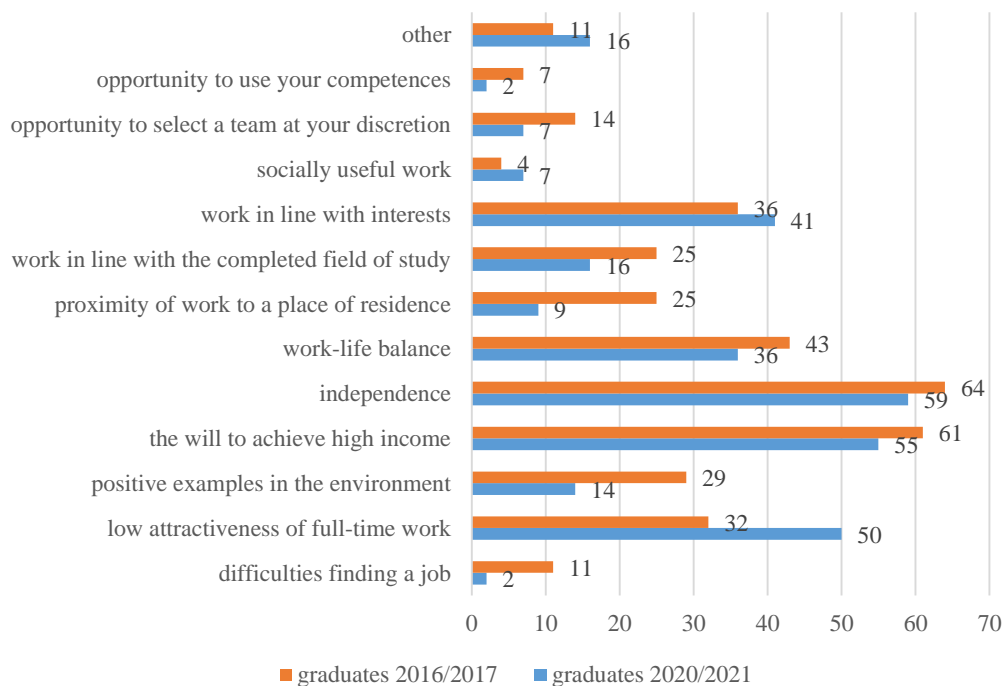


Figure 9. The moment graduates working as entrepreneurs and freelancers started their businesses (in %)

Source: Research by the Career Office of the University of Silesia.



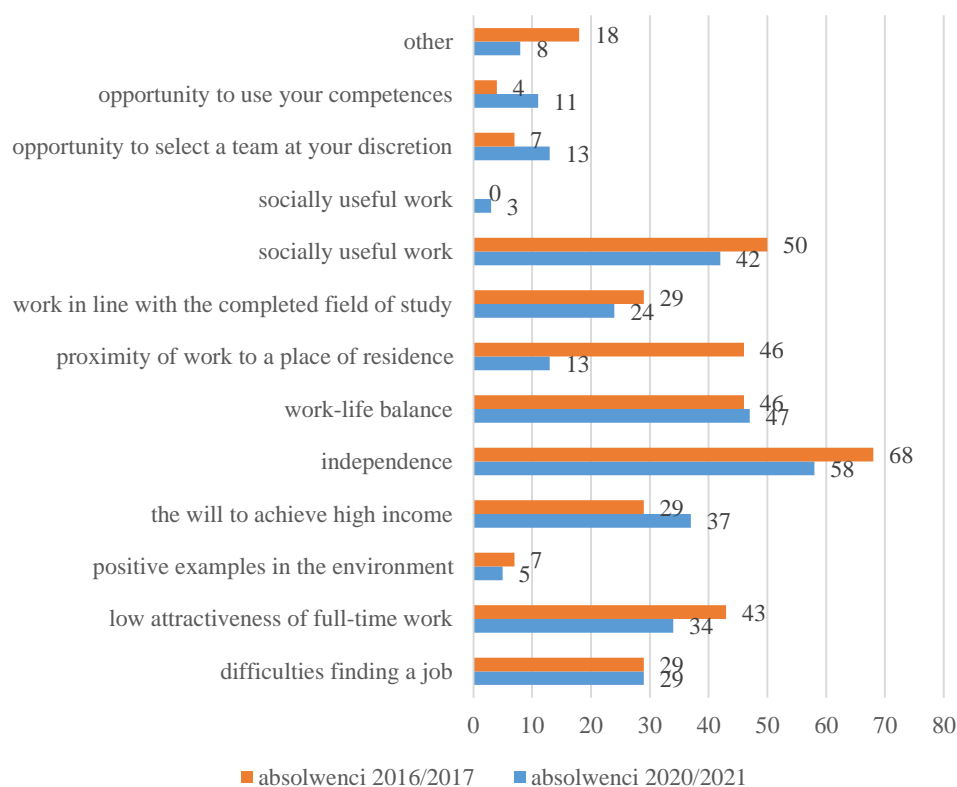
Note: The results do not add up to 100% as more than one answer was possible.

Figure 10. Graduates' motives for starting their businesses (in %)

Source: Research by the Career Office of the University of Silesia (2016/2017 graduates – N = 28 [including entrepreneurs and freelancers]; 2020/2021 graduates – N = 44).

Graduates from both the academic years 2016/2017 and 2020/2021 most often started their businesses because they wanted to be independent, and achieve high income and a satisfactory work–life balance. They also wanted to combine their work as entrepreneurs with their interests and found full-time work less attractive. The results for this group are presented in Figure 10.

Graduates who worked as freelancers most often set up their businesses in order to be independent. The factor of work–life balance, that is, the ability to reconcile professional and private lives, also played an important role. Comparing 2016/2017 graduates to graduates from the academic year 2020/2021, the share of this factor increased by 24 percentage points and amounted to 70%. For graduates working as freelancers, the ability to perform work consistent with their interests was also important (Figure 11).



Note: The results do not add up to 100% as more than one answer was possible.

Figure 11. Motives of graduates working as freelancers for starting their businesses (in %)

Source: Research by the Career Office of the University of Silesia (2016/2017 graduates – N = 28 [including entrepreneurs and freelancers]; 2020/2021 graduates – N = 38).

9. Conclusions and recommendations

The surveys conducted among graduates before and after the COVID-19 pandemic showed a negative impact of the pandemic on graduates in the job market. The period of lockdown, limited social contacts, economic crisis and uncertainty about the future had a negative impact on the acquisition of skills related to the graduates' transition to the job market. Young people - including students in academia - had limited opportunities for internships, volunteering or job offers during the pandemic. Students found it difficult to access Careers Offices and therefore career guidance/orientation support. In turn, the lockdown and high level of uncertainty about the future functioning of the economy was not conducive to hiring decisions, which was a limiting factor for job opportunities, particularly for young people without much work experience. The 'pre-pandemic' graduates claimed to know where and how to look for a job and what job positions to take up after graduation more often than the 'post-pandemic' graduates. More graduates from the academic year 2016/2017 indicated that they knew employers' requirements for people entering the job market than those from the 2020/2021

academic year. The ‘pre-pandemic’ graduates were more active in the job market than ‘post-pandemic’ ones. It should be clearly emphasized that stable employment was among the key factors that graduates took into account when looking for a job. Young people expected to find a job in the primary job market. They did not want to have flexible forms of work.

Summarizing the collected empirical material based on the surveys of 2016/2017 and 2020/2021 graduates, the following recommendations can be made:

- offering career counselling classes for final-year students of first-cycle studies (on how to prepare application documents, search for a job and prepare themselves for job interviews, etc.);
- offering labour law classes for final-year students of first-cycle studies (employee rights and obligations, types of employment contracts, etc.);
- informing students about the situation in the job market (changes in demand for specific professions and qualifications);
- informing students about the possibility of obtaining funds to start a business (inviting representatives of the business environment and public employment services to meetings with students);
- continuing internship programmes for students;
- informing students about the activity of the Career Office of the University of Silesia (also at the level of faculties and institutes).

Rocki and Werner point out that ‘Transition analyses can be the basis for correcting the offered (assumed) educational outcomes, organizing the course of teaching and also conducting other studies’ (Rocki, Werner 2021:6). Therefore, periodically examining the professional careers of graduates in particular fields of study is justified. The results of this research may constitute the basis for modifying the content of educational programmes in higher education institutions. However, it should be borne in mind that the job market is undergoing dynamic transformation and today’s deficits in the job market may turn out to be surpluses in a few years and vice versa. Moreover, it is worth noting that in the annual ranking of universities by *Perspektywy*,¹ one of the criteria for assessing universities is that graduates are found to be successful. In the event of deepening problems with the recruitment of students, favourable information about the job market situation of graduates of individual universities may be an important factor in attracting candidates to studies.

¹ A monthly magazine for young people who are on the threshold of choosing their further education path. It discusses numerous fields of study and professions. It also extensively presents universities and academic centres throughout Poland. It conducts and announces many rankings, including of the best public and private secondary schools and universities, as well as MBA rankings [translator’s note].

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