

PERCEPTION OF THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN SHAPING THE LIVING STANDARDS AND CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Michał DZIADKIEWICZ^{1*}, Paulina BANASIK²

¹ Czestochowa University of Technology, Faculty of Management; michal.dziadkiewicz@pcz.pl,
ORCID: 0000-0001-5450-1669

² Czestochowa University of Technology, Faculty of Management; paulina.banasik@pcz.pl,
ORCID: 0009-0001-2855-262X

* Correspondence author

Purpose: The aim of this article is to analyse social beliefs about the role of education in shaping the standard of living, professional opportunities and access to the labour market. Particular attention is paid to assessing the relationship between the level of education and the possibilities of achieving higher earnings and career development.

Design/methodology/approach: The first part of the study reviewed the literature on the role of education in the labour market. The next part of the study analysed the results of a survey conducted at the end of 2024. The questionnaire included questions about the perception of the impact of education on the quality of life, professional situation and access to the labour market, as well as gender equality in access to higher and specialised education. Data were collected based on six substantive questions assessed on a five-point Likert scale.

Findings: Analysis of the research results showed that the vast majority of respondents see a clear link between the level of education and the quality of life and professional opportunities. The article also addresses issues related to the perception of exclusion from the job market in the context of one's lack of education, as well as equal access to education between women and men in various fields of science and professions.

Practical implications: The results of the study may constitute a starting point for designing activities in the field of educational policy and the job market aimed at increasing access to education and strengthening the role of education in counteracting professional exclusion.

Social implications: The data obtained indicate that society largely perceives education as a key factor in determining professional and material success. There is also a growing acceptance of equal access to education regardless of gender. However, the results also suggest the need for further work on social awareness regarding equal opportunities and counteracting persistent stereotypes in terms of the value attributed to education and its impact on professional career.

Originality/value: The article contributes to the debate on the social perception of education as a factor differentiating life and career opportunities. The analysis shows a clear societal belief in the benefits of education, while also pointing out areas where further action is needed to support equality and inclusiveness in the access to education and the labour market.

Keywords: education, labour market/job market, equal opportunities, human capital, educational stereotypes, professional development

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Higher education has for many years been perceived as one of the key factors determining an individual's professional, social and economic success (Small et al., 2018). For decades, a university diploma has been a symbol of social prestige, and at the same time a gateway to better paid, more stable and more satisfying work (OECD, 2022). In the reality of a knowledge-based economy and dynamic changes in the global labour market, obtaining a higher education is still considered an important investment in an individual's future (Maheshwari et al., 2023). At the same time, however, with the increasing access to education and the increasing number of university graduates, questions about the real value of a diploma and its actual impact on the quality of life and career opportunities are increasingly being asked (Tomlinson, 2008; Brown et al., 2011).

The phenomenon of democratization of higher education, which led to an increase in the number of people completing their studies, also contributed to the so-called education inflation – i.e. a decrease in its value on the job market (Barro, Lee, 2013; Kwiek, 2019). More and more young people with higher education degrees are having difficulty entering the job market, often working below their qualifications or in jobs unrelated to their field of study (Allen, van der Velden, 2001). Despite this, empirical data still confirm the existence of a clear correlation between the level of education and the amount of income, employment stability, level of self-esteem and the overall quality of life (Chevalier, 2003; Eurostat, 2023). In Poland, according to the Education and Training Monitor 2024, already 46.3% of people aged 25-34 have a higher education – which is not only above the EU average, but also meets the goal set for 2030.

In the area of modern human resources management, the role of education is of particular importance. Modern organizations, striving to build their competitive advantage, are increasingly focusing on the effective use of employee potential - regardless of their gender, age, origin or level of education (Sukiennik, Dziadkiewicz, 2024). At the same time, it is the level and field of education that often determine not only access to the labour market, but also the career path, promotion opportunities, expectations regarding organizational culture, management style and the level of employee participation (Somers et al., 2019). In this context, issues related to equal opportunities and social justice are becoming increasingly important, especially in relation to equal access to education and equal treatment in the workplace. There is more and more talk about the need to build inclusive organizational structures and transparent and objective criteria for assessing employee competences (Banasik, 2024; Iwasaki, Satogami, 2023). Of particular importance here are issues related to gender equality – both in the context of access to specific educational programmes – and the opportunities for professional development for women and men (Szczepańczyk, Dziadkiewicz, 2024).

The research presented in the report *University Graduates in the Polish Labor Market* (2024) confirmed that individuals with higher education have a lower risk of unemployment and higher earnings compared to the national average. These findings emphasize the role of higher education as a factor that enhances the economic stability of individuals and improves their professional situation, which is of significant importance for social and economic policy.

The data presented in the OECD report *Earnings by Educational Attainment* further emphasize the economic value of a higher education diploma. The earnings premium of approximately 100% compared to individuals with lower educational attainment provides clear evidence of the financial benefits associated with completing higher education. This income advantage has important implications both for individuals and for entire economic systems, underlining higher education's role as an investment in human capital and a factor increasing competitiveness in the labour market.

The conducted research analyses beliefs and attitudes regarding the impact of education on professional life and the perception of equal opportunities in various social groups, providing valuable data allowing for a better understanding of the mechanisms operating both in the labour market and in the education system. These results can serve as a starting point for creating more equitable educational and management policies. Therefore, it is particularly important to examine how higher education is perceived by people representing different social, professional and educational environments, as well as what importance they attribute to the role of education in the context of achieving a higher standard of living and fulfilling professional aspirations.

2. Methods

The purpose of the study was to identify public opinions on the importance of education in the context of the quality of life, employment opportunities and equal professional opportunities for women and men. For this purpose, the following research hypotheses were formulated:

1. Most respondents believe that higher education increases opportunities in the job market and translates into higher earnings and standard of living.
2. Women and men are not perceived as having equal access to all fields of study.
3. Lack of education is seen as a factor which limits access to expected employment.

A total of 360 respondents took part in the study. The respondents were selected randomly. The research group was diverse in terms of gender, age and level of education, which allowed for a broad perspective on the analysed issues.

Women constituted 52.2% of participants, while men constituted 47.8%. Also, a significant percentage of participants had primary education (31.4%) and vocational education (20.8%). People with higher education constituted 28.3% of the subjects. The age structure was

dominated by people aged 36-45 (30.6%) and 46-55 (25.8%). Participants aged 26-35 years constituted 18.3% of the total, while those over 65 years of age constituted 3.9%. A small part of the sample was made up of people under 18 years of age (1.1%).

Considering the place of residence, 58.3% of respondents indicated an urban commune, 23.3% an urban-rural commune, while 14.4% indicated a rural commune.

The survey questionnaire consisted of two parts: a substantive part, containing five closed questions regarding opinions on the impact of education and gender equality on the labour market, and a personal data part. A five-point scale of responses was used, with each issue being assessed according to the following assigned value:

- 1 – I strongly disagree.
- 2 – I disagree.
- 3 – I have no opinion.
- 4 – I agree.
- 5 – I strongly agree.

Results are presented as percentages, rounded to one decimal place, in accordance with the recommendations of the American Psychological Association (7th ed.) (APA PsycNET, 2020, p. 179) for the presentation of numerical data in social research.

3. Results

The article will further present detailed results of the study on the perception of higher education in the context of professional and social life. The analysis includes respondents' opinions on the relationship between education level and quality of life, the amount of income, career opportunities and equal access to education.

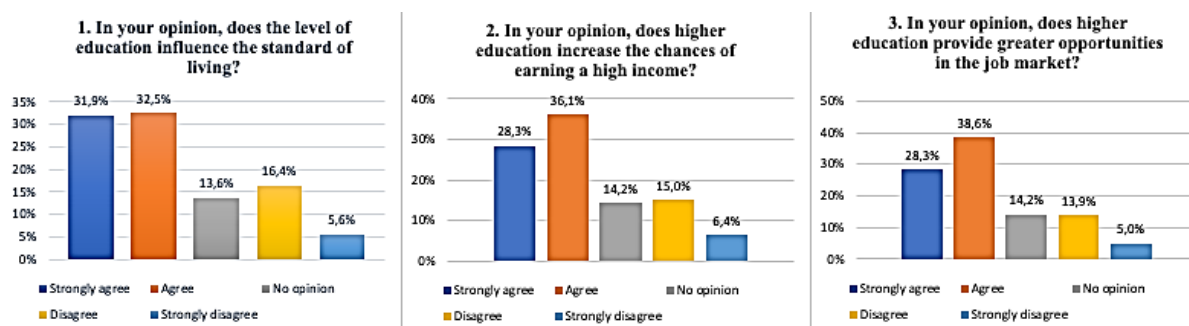


Figure 1. Summary of respondents' answers to questions related to the impact of education on the standard of living, earnings and opportunities in the job market.

Source: Own study.

The analysis of the answers to question 1 regarding the impact of one's level of education on the standard of living shows that the vast majority of respondents see a strong correlation between these two aspects. As many as 64.4% of respondents expressed the belief that

education significantly affects the quality of life – including 31.9% who selected the answer “I strongly agree” and 32.5% who selected “I agree”. This result indicates the prevailing belief within society in the value of education as a factor contributing to better economic and social functioning.

At the same time, it should be noted that almost a quarter of respondents (22%) were sceptical about this relationship – 16.4% of respondents answered “I disagree” and 5.6% “I strongly disagree”. This attitude may result from individual professional experiences in which higher education did not translate into the expected promotion, financial stability or job satisfaction. It may also be an expression of the assumption that the quality of life is now determined to a greater extent by other factors – such as soft skills, network of contacts, professional flexibility, location or practical experience, and not the level of formal education itself.

In the second question, most respondents see a connection between the level of education and the amount of income achieved. As many as 64.4% of our study subjects expressed the opinion that higher education affects the level of earnings - including 28.3% who expressed strong agreement, and 36.1% who indicated the answer "I agree". Such a high percentage of affirmative responses reflects the belief that investing in education translates into the access to better-paid positions. This belief may have its sources in observations of the labour market, where professional advancement and employment in managerial and expert positions very often require higher education. In many cases, it is the level of education that determines the possibility of crossing the so-called "glass ceiling" in the professional hierarchy (Taparia et al., 2022).

A group of 21.4% questioned this relationship. Their scepticism may stem from personal professional experiences in which completing higher education did not translate directly into adequate remuneration. This may also be a reflection of the realities of the modern labour market, where practical competences, professional flexibility, mobility and experience are becoming increasingly important (Guryan et al., 2014).

In the third question related to the impact of education on opportunities on the job market, as many as 66.9% of subjects expressed the belief that having a university degree increases employment opportunities – including 28.3% of respondents who answered “I strongly agree” and 38.6% who answered “I tend to agree.” This result confirms the deeply rooted assumption that higher education opens up access to a wider range of job offers, especially in positions requiring specialist competences, higher responsibility or the ability to manage a team (OECD, 2023).

At the same time, however, 18.9% of our study respondents expressed the opposite opinion. Among them, 13.9% disagreed with such a statement, and 5% indicated the answer "I strongly disagree". Their position may be the result of observing the growing role of practical competences, professional experience, interpersonal skills, language proficiency or professional flexibility (Lewandowska et al., 2020). In some industries, an academic diploma

is no longer a clear condition for professional success, and what counts most is efficiency and real skills (Kajta et al., 2025).

The analysis of respondents' answers indicates that the prevailing belief in the significant impact of education on the quality of life, income and chances on the labour market is prevalent in society, which confirms hypothesis 1. Most study subjects see a correlation between the level of education and professional and economic opportunities, which indicates a strong belief in the value of education as a tool for improving life circumstances.

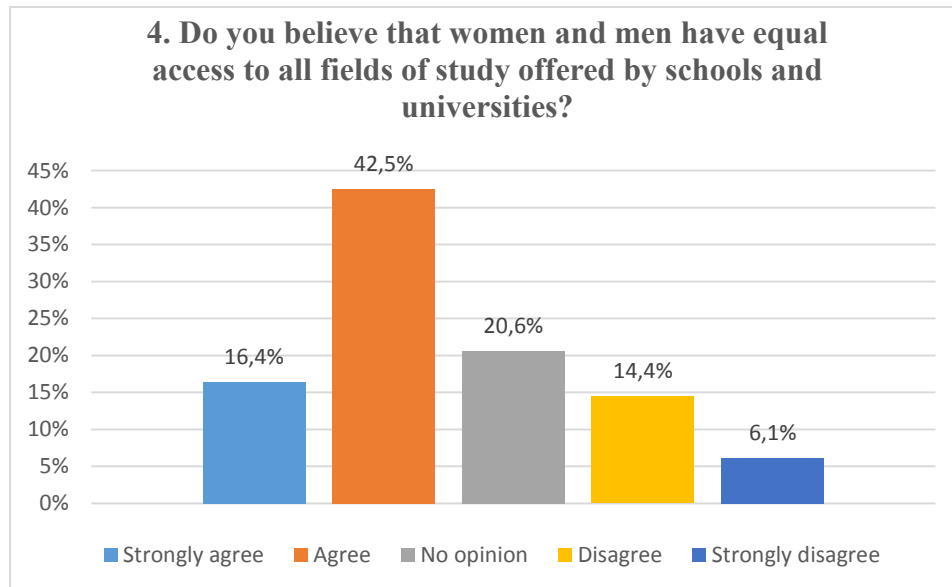


Figure 2. Summary of respondents' answers to the question related to equal access to education for women and men.

Source: Own study.

The analysis of the answers to the fourth question shows that the majority of respondents perceive the education system in Poland as equal in terms of access to the offered fields of study for women and men. As many as 58.9% of respondents expressed their belief in the existence of such equality. This result may indicate a socially established assumption that formal recruitment rules and regulations of educational institutions do not differentiate candidates based on gender. For many people, the education system appears to be neutral and equally accessible to all.

Only 20.6% of respondents expressed the belief that this equality is not always reflected in reality. Of these, 14.4% indicated the answer "I disagree" and 6.1% - "I strongly disagree". These attitudes may result from observations of social conditions and cultural patterns that – despite formal equality – still shape the educational preferences of women and men. In practice, this means continuing divisions into “typically male” and “typically female” fields of study, such as the dominance of men in technical fields (e.g. computer science, engineering) or women in the care and education sector (e.g. nursing, pedagogy) (Zawistowska, 2024).

In summary, the majority of respondents perceive the education system in Poland as equal in terms of access to fields of study for women and men, which indicates a strong social belief in the neutrality and fairness of recruitment rules and the functioning of educational institutions, regardless of gender. Thus, **hypothesis 2, which states that women and men are not perceived as having equal access to all educational fields, cannot be confirmed.**

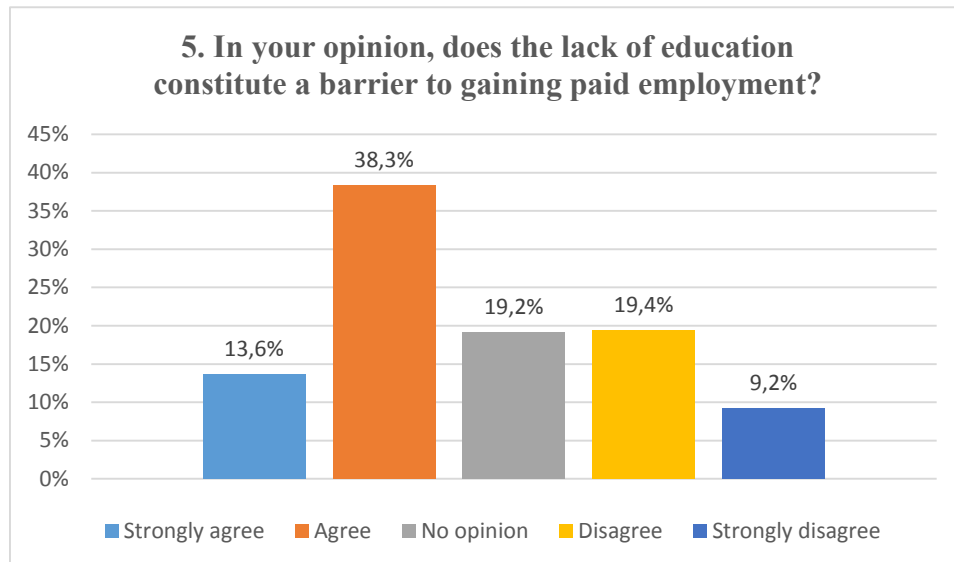


Figure 3. Summary of respondents' answers to the question related to the impact of education on gaining paid employment.

Source: Own study.

The results of the answers to question 5 indicate that a significant proportion of respondents perceive the lack of education as a significant barrier in accessing employment. A total of 51.9% of respondents stated that the lack of formal education limits the possibilities of finding a job – including 13.6% who chose the answer “I strongly agree” and 38.3% “I agree”. This demonstrates the deeply rooted belief that graduating is one of the basic conditions for participating in the labour market. This may result from observations of recruitment practices as well as from experiences in which the lack of education is often associated with limited access to better-paid, stable positions.

On the other hand, 28.6% of subjects expressed the opposite opinion. In this group, professional experience, specific practical skills, interpersonal skills or flexibility in action may play a key role, which often outweigh the importance of formal qualifications - especially in a dynamically changing professional environment.

To sum up, **most of respondents see the limitations that the lack of education entails in the context of employment, which may indicate the existence of social and systemic barriers that make it difficult for people without formal qualifications to actively participate in the labour market, which confirms hypothesis 3.**

4. Summary

The aim of the study was to identify public opinions on the importance of higher education in the context of the quality of life, employment opportunities and equal opportunities for women and men in the educational and professional market. The analysis of the results provided a number of interesting observations that allow for the formulation of both theoretical and practical conclusions.

The obtained results clearly indicate that in the public awareness, higher education remains a key determinant of social mobility and professional success. The vast majority of respondents treat a university diploma as an instrument enabling them to achieve a higher standard of living, obtain higher income and increase competitiveness in the job market. The obtained results are consistent with previous studies indicating the significant role of higher education in shaping individuals' living conditions and professional opportunities. OECD (2022) research has shown that people with higher education attain higher levels of employment and income compared to those with lower educational attainment. Conclusions highlights that university graduates in Poland are less likely to experience long-term unemployment and are more often employed in positions aligned with their qualifications. Despite the increasingly discussed phenomenon of education inflation, the belief in its fundamental importance is still deeply rooted.

In relation to the issue of gender equality in one's access to education, the obtained findings indicate a dominant belief in formal equality of opportunities. The majority of respondents declare that women and men have equal access to all fields of education. Despite being aware of the social and cultural conditions that influence educational choices and the reproduction of gender stereotypes, study subjects most often perceive the education system as gender neutral.

The conducted study allowed to verify the following formulated hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: The majority of respondents believe that higher education increases opportunities on the job market and translates into higher earnings and standard of living – this was confirmed. The data showed a strong public belief in the benefits of higher education.

Hypothesis 2: Women and men are not perceived as having equal access to all educational fields – this was not confirmed. The majority of respondents expressed their belief in equal access to education.

Hypothesis 3: Lack of education is seen as a factor that limits one's access to expected employment – this was confirmed. More than half of subjects indicated the lack of education as a significant limitation in the labour market.

The presented research findings carry significant practical implications for various stakeholders involved in the education system and the labor market. They can support the development of educational policies aimed at increasing access to higher education and promoting gender equality in education and employment. Higher education institutions may

utilize these conclusions to adapt their educational offerings to the evolving demands of the labor market and to strengthen mechanisms of social mobility. Furthermore, the recommendations included in the article may prove useful for entities responsible for professional development and labor market policy, especially in the context of increasing digitalization and automation, which affect the structure of qualifications. From a scientific perspective, the article contributes contemporary insights to research on social perceptions of education and its role in shaping quality of life and career opportunities, providing a foundation for further interdisciplinary analyses in this field.

The study also confirms the need for further analyses on the real impact of education on the quality of life and professional mobility – especially in the context of dynamic changes taking place in the labour market and the ongoing digitalisation and automation of professions.

References

1. Allen, J., van der Velden, R. (2001). Educational mismatches versus skill mismatches: Effects on wages, job satisfaction, and on-the-job search. *Oxford Economic Papers*, Vol. 53, Iss. 3, pp. 434-452.
2. Banasik, P. (2024). Znaczenie zarządzania różnorodnością w przedsiębiorstwach z perspektywy pracowników różnych pokoleń. *Przegląd Organizacji*, 38-44.
3. Barro, R.J., Lee, J.W. (2013). A new data set of educational attainment in the world, 1950-2010. *Journal of Development Economics*, Vol. 104, pp. 184-198.
4. Becker, G.S. (1993). *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis with Special Reference to Education*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
5. Brown, P., Lauder, H., Ashton, D. (2011). *The Global Auction: The Broken Promises of Education, Jobs, and Incomes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
6. Chevalier, A. (2003). Measuring over-education. *Economica*, Vol. 70, Iss. 279, pp. 509-531.
7. Eurostat (2023). *Education and training statistics*. Retrieved from: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Education_and_training_statistics_introduced, 29.06.2025.
8. Główny Urząd Statystyczny (2018). *Statystyka wskaźników edukacyjnych*. Retrieved from: <https://ws.stat.gov.pl/Article/2018/7/025-036>, 29.06.2025.
9. Guryan, J., Pane, J. (2021). The growing importance of social skills in the labor market. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 132, Iss. 4, pp. 1593-1640.
10. Iwasaki, I., Satogami, M. (2023). Gender wage gap in European emerging markets: a meta-analytic perspective. *Journal for Labour Market Research*, 57(1), 9.

11. Kajta, J., Sarnowska, J., Pustulka, P., Kwiatkowska, A. (2025). Planning for the future in the shadow of the polycrisis: Young women's uncertain transitions to adulthood. *Acta Sociologica*.
12. Komisja Europejska (2023). *Monitor edukacji i szkoleń: Polska*. Retrieved from: <https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eac/education-and-training-monitor/pl/country-reports/poland.html>, 29.06.2025.
13. Kwiek, M. (2019). *Changing European academics: A comparative study of social stratification, work patterns and research productivity*. London: Routledge.
14. Lewandowska, A., Stopa, M. (2020). The impact of innovative professional qualifications on the sense of employment security: Evidence from Poland. *Economics & Sociology*, 13(3), 72-83.
15. Maheshwari, G., Kha, K.L., Arokiasamy, A.R.A. (2023). Factors affecting students' entrepreneurial intentions: a systematic review (2005-2022) for future directions in theory and practice. *Management Review Quarterly*, 73(4), 1903-1970.
16. OECD (2022). *Earnings by educational attainment. OECD Indicators*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
17. OECD (2023). *Education at a Glance 2022: OECD Indicators*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
18. Pilipiec, P., Groot, W., Pavlova, M. (2021). The effect of an increase of the retirement age on the health, well-being, and labor force participation of older workers: a systematic literature review. *Journal of Population Ageing*, 14, 271-315.
19. Polski Instytut Ekonomiczny (2024). Raport: *Absolwenci uczelni na polskim rynku pracy*.
20. Słomczyński, K.M., Janicka, K. (2010). Stratyfikacja społeczna a wykształcenie i pozycja zawodowa. *Studia Socjologiczne, Vol. 2, No. 197*, pp. 23-45.
21. Small, L., Shacklock, K., Marchant, T. (2018). Employability: a contemporary review for higher education stakeholders. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 70(1), 148-166.
22. Somers, M.A., Cabus, S.J., Groot, W., van den Brink, H.M. (2019). Horizontal mismatch between employment and field of education: Evidence from a systematic literature review. *Journal of economic surveys*, 33(2), 567-603.
23. Sukiennik, K., Dziadkiewicz, M. (2024). Managing environmental social responsibility in cities according to the young generation. *Scientific Papers of Silesian University of Technology. Organization and Management Series*, 527-541.
24. Szczepańczyk, M., Dziadkiewicz, M. (2024). Social inequalities and discrimination against women in access to high-level positions. *Scientific Papers of Silesian University of Technology. Organization and Management Series*, 597-607.
25. Taparia, M., Lenka, U. (2022). An integrated conceptual framework of the glass ceiling effect. *Journal of Organizational Effectiveness: People and Performance*, Vol. 9, No. 3, pp. 372-400.

26. Tomlinson, M. (2008). 'The degree is not enough': Students' perceptions of the role of higher education credentials for graduate work and employability. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol. 29, Iss. 1, pp. 49-61.
27. Zawistowska, A. (2024). *Gender gap in education. How society, economy, and culture influence educational choices of women and men in Poland*. Warszawa: Fundacja Rozwoju Systemu Edukacji. Retrieved from: https://www.frse.org.pl/brepo/panel_repo_files/2024/06/28/6iolqc/luka-plci-w-edukacji-online-ang.pdf, 29.06.2025.