

THE POPULARITY OF GEOGRAPHY IN POLAND AS A SCIENTIFIC DISCIPLINE TO STUDY INTRODUCTORY REPORT OF THE RESEARCH

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Abstract

The number of secondary school graduates choosing a particular discipline to study is, to some extent, the reflection of the position of this scientific discipline and the improvement of its research achievements as well as the economical needs for such university graduates. The popularity of a particular scientific discipline is revealed in the number of applicants wanting to study the selected discipline along with the number of students. It depends on many factors, such as: changing demographic processes, social changes, the demand for specialists in the sphere of the economy, the status and the position of a particular scientific discipline, the personal interest of the individual as well as the formal conditions (e.g. limits of the accepted students, legal restrictions, demanded disciplines, etc.). In order to answer the question how popular the Geographical studies are in Poland, the statistic data of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education was analyzed. Furthermore, the questionnaires among the students of Geography in eight academic centers in Poland were conducted. The research allowed to capture the important factors that had the great impact on the interest in the sphere of the geographical studies among young people. It should allow the universities dealing with geographical studies to develop the strategies of popularization of such studies. The psychological aspect of the made choice had the considerable impact on the popularity. The main factors, which were crucial as far as the selection of the studies at the university was concerned, appeared as follow: the close distance from the university, the possibility of selecting the preferred specialty, the prestige of the university in the rankings, the family traditions.

Key words: *competences, entrepreneurship, reasons for the selection, the strategy of education.*

Introduction

There has been a rapid increase in the number of students observed in Poland since the 1990s of the 20th century. According to the statistic data, the number of students has tripled so far (there were 600 thousand students in 1989 and to 1,9 million – in 2010). The increase in the number of students has been accompanied by the establishment of new institutions in the sphere of the higher education. It includes private schools, which now constitute two thirds of the whole higher education sector. It is significant, though, that some of them are located in the areas with no tradition of higher education institutions heretofore. Initially, such rapid growth of the interest in the studies appeared due to the economic changes that took place after the year 1989 in Poland. Nowadays it is the result of the globalization processes and the creation of the so-called information society. Furthermore, the variety of interests in the sphere of academic disciplines among the secondary school graduates can be observed. Additionally, some of the disciplines are more popular than others for some years now. It depends on many factors, such as: changing demographic processes, social changes, the demand for specialists in the sphere

of the economy, the status and the position of a particular scientific discipline, the personal interest of the individual as well as the formal conditions (e.g. limits of the accepted students, legal restrictions, demanded disciplines, etc.). The psychological aspect of the choice has the considerable impact on the popularity. Therefore, the question dealing with the popularity of Geography as a field of studies considering the ongoing social and economic transformations in Poland seems to be appropriate.

Transformations in Sphere of the Higher Education in Poland

The higher education in Poland appears to be one of the areas of the social life that has been developing in the most dynamic way. It has been under numerous institutional changes during the last twenty years. Presently, nearly 2 million students study in Poland at 467 different universities including 132 public and 335 private academic institutions (GUS, 2010). Therefore, Poland occurs to have one of greatest rates in the field of schooling in the world and the greatest number of higher education institutions in Europe. Although the number of the academic institutions increased, the growth has not referred to the number of students. It could be observed as the number of students has been decreasing since 2005. The number of the graduates has been increasing, though, due to the fact that it is related to the people who were born during the so-called baby boom. Therefore, the greatest number of students is to finish their studies at present.

Additionally, in recent years, the noticeable loss of interest in the disciplines, such as: humanities, social studies and informatics can be depicted. Nevertheless, the interest in some scientific fields increased, namely, in architecture, construction, protection and security, as well as specializations related to health and social welfare. Apart from a slight decrease in the popularity of the studies connected with economics and administration, such studies are still one of the most popular with the students. It must be stated that the number of candidates applying for a particular course of studies appears to be the representation of its popularity. It should be noted, though, that the number of candidates could be also influenced by the formal conditions, such as: the limits of the accepted students marked by the institutions (which are frequently being increased), the possibility of applying for more than one course (almost 3, however, the universities try to make a substantial modification of such regulations), which makes it difficult to prepare the comparison. Nevertheless, the presented data can provide the picture of the popular disciplines to study in Poland. Furthermore, the Report (2010) of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education shows that Geography has decreased its popularity since lost 10 points in the position ranking of the most popular fields of studies regarding the year 2002. Nevertheless, it still appears to be attractive among young people due to the criteria dealing with the number of candidates applying for one place in order to be a student of geographical studies. Namely, in 2005 the number on average was 7.8, in 2006, it was 6.7, and in 2008 it referred to 5.0. However, this value was varied in the individual universities. The number of candidates wanting to study Geography was significantly influenced by the initiation of new fields of studies related to Geography, such as: tourism and recreation, land management, environmental protection. That is to say, the new disciplines reduced the number of candidates to study Geography itself.

The Interest of Students from Secondary Schools in the Range of Geographical Studies

The research focuses on the investigation of the opinions and views on geographical studies having in light the students' feelings and judgments. The research is carried out in the field of the interests of the potential students and their job opportunities.

Yet, another argument in favor of illustrating the young people's interest in Geography appears to be their choice of selecting Geography as one of the leaving school exams (final exams in Polish called Matura exams). Since the year 2005, when Geography was introduced to the group of the written compulsory subjects that students could choose from, the significant proportion of students selecting this subject has occurred, especially in technical and high vocational schools. In 2010 the percentage of students sitting the Geography exam was more than 50%. Moreover, Geography in the range of the selected compulsory subjects occurred as number one. In the year 2010, the number of students taking exam in Geography decreased to 13.4% (i.e., 54,342 people). It was caused by the change in the Matura exam regulations for the years 2009 and 2012 where students could select additional subjects but it is not compulsory. However, Geography is still the most popular subject, which could demonstrate its popularity as a subject connected with the enrollment and referring to various fields of studies.

Methodology of Research

General Background of Research

The objective of the studies was to learn about the students' interests considering the geography as the discipline in comparison to other scientific disciplines. Furthermore, it was essential to reveal how popular it was to study geography in general. Therefore, the investigation aimed at acknowledging the current level of interest in geographical studies in relation to other disciplines. Moreover, it aimed at determining the reason of the choice in favour of the geographical studies by Geography students concerning the undergraduate Geography students (3 years of studies – BSc degree) Geography students (5 years of studies - MSc degree) and postgraduate Geography students (2 years of studies –MSc degree), Furthermore, the investigation aimed at showing how the choice of Geography as the Matura exam subject and the participation in the Geography competitions (called Geography Olympiad) increase the number of Geography students. Nevertheless, the main purpose of the studies was to refer to the students' expectations with regard to the scientific faculty, didactic facilities, the library resources and the collections of maps as well as the evaluation of the competences and skills acquired during the studies, moreover, the plans for the future and further education and work the labor market. This stage of the study was designed to find out the information dealing with e.g., the self-esteem, the education, the formal range of competencies during the studies, the desired jobs, the desire to be self employed, the knowledge concerning the work possibilities and satisfaction in the light of future employment and job opportunities.

Sample of Research

The research, which was based on the questionnaire (survey), was conducted among Geography students from six universities, namely, it involved 639 students all together. It referred to the randomly chosen universities, in which the total number of their students was involved in the investigation.

The diagnostic procedures involved students from several academic centers that educate geographers (The Jagiellonian University, the University of Warsaw, Maria Curie - Skłodowska University, Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce, the Pomeranian Academy in Słupsk, the Pedagogical University in Cracow), to be precise, 235 men and 404 women could be distinguished. The respondents were the third-years students of the three-year course - BSc degree (53.4%), full-time (stationary) course - MSc degree (28.9%) and postgraduate MSc studies (17.7%). Moreover, they were divided into two groups:

- studying Geography of different specializations at universities, such as: the Jagiellonian University in Cracow (the specialization of Tourism, Land Management, Physical Geography, Social and Economical Geography), the University of Warsaw (no specialization), Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin (the specialization of Social and Economical Geography, Cartography, Hydrography, Geoinformation in Geography, Palaeogeography of the Quaternary Period – Physical Geography);

- studying the field of Geography teaching and other specializations at universities, which have been transformed into universities, and at which the education was related to the experience of teacher training colleges and other kinds of education for teachers. They were represented by the following academic institutions: the Pedagogical University in Cracow (specialties: Geography and the Natural Science, Tourism, Entrepreneurship), Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce (Geography and the Natural Science, Tourism), The Pomeranian Academy in Słupsk (Geography

Instrument and Procedures

In order to gather the empirical material the questionnaire was used so as to provide data dealing with the reasons of selecting Geography as the field of studies, its popularity as well as job opportunities. Prior to the research conducted a preliminary survey as carried out to test the research tool. The final questionnaire included 17 questions divided into four topic groups. The questions were of a closed type (12) and open type (5). In the open type of a question, the respondents were able to answer them independently.

Data Analysis

The questions presented in the questionnaire were arranged in the following topic groups:

- Interest in Geography in the high school and the participation in the Geography competitions (Geography Olympiad);
- Reasons for choosing the geographical studies at the particular university;
- Students' expectations from the academic staff, didactic foundation, the geographical resources and cartographic collections in the library;
- Estimation of the developed competences during the geographical studies and further career plans;

It must be emphasized that the questionnaire was anonymous and conducted under the supervision of the university staff. The received research results were the subject to the statistical analysis, i.e. both the qualitative and quantitative ones. Additionally, they were presented in graphs.

Results of Research

In the light of the outcomes, it is can be stated that most Geography students appear to be the graduates of general secondary schools (high schools), i.e., 80.4% and their interest in Geography mainly result from the secondary education. Namely, 10.4% of Geography students graduated from the secondary vocational schools and 9.2% of them from technical schools. Furthermore, most of the Geography students took an exam in Geography during the Matura leaving exam session in the new form, i.e., 90. 8%, and 4.2% in the old form, moreover, 5% of them did not sit the Geography exam at all. Furthermore, most of them took an extended level of the exam, namely 67.8%, almost all of whom were from the University of Warsaw, the Jagiellonian University, Maria Curie - Skłodowska University and the Pomeranian Academy.

In the remaining academic institutions, the responses were divided almost equally, as to say, Geography exam was taken by almost the same number of students at the extended and basic levels. Among all the respondents, only 39 people participated in the Geography competitions (called Geography Olympiad). In this group, there were also the so-called finalists among who most studied at the Jagiellonian University (9 finalists), the University of Warsaw (5 finalists), Maria Curie - Skłodowska University (3 finalists), the Pomeranian Academy (2 finalists) and Jan Kochanowski University (a person with the distinction). Yet another topic group in the conducted questionnaire concerned the selection of geographical studies at the particular university. The students were asked the following questions, specifically, if it was their first course of the undertaken studies, if they tried to enroll to different academic institutions selecting Geography as a course of the studies, if Geography was their priority as far as the course of the studies was concerned, why they chose the geographical studies at the particular academic institutions, how they learned about the selected geographical studies at the particular academic institutions and what factors determined their choice. For more than a half of the students (52%) Geography was their priority as far as the course of the studies was concerned. Furthermore, 38.1% of the respondents selected Geography, even though, they applied for other courses of the studies, but they finally decided to study Geography. Additionally, the main factors that determined their choice of studying Geography at the particular academic institution were as follow: the close distance of the academic institution, the possibility of the specialization of their choice, the prestige of the academic institution in the rankings, the suggestions of the acquaintances / friends, the attractiveness of the location of the particular academic institution. Moreover, the students from the Jagiellonian University indicated the family tradition (Figure 1).

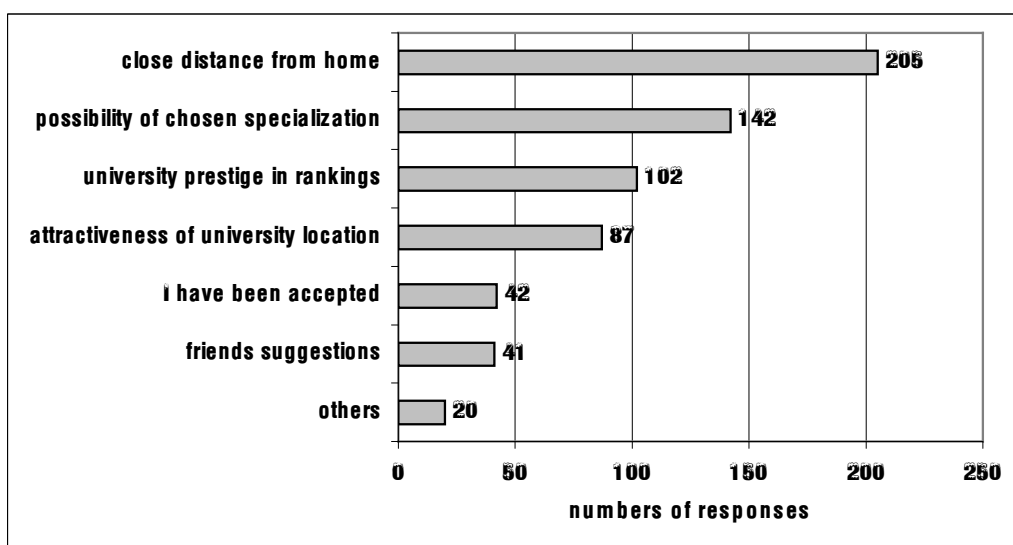


Figure 1: Reasons of selecting geographical studies.

Students learned about the geographical studies mainly from the Internet (58%), from the teacher in secondary school (25%) and during the so-called open days at universities (20%). The choice of the geographical studied was influenced by the following factor: the interest in the subject resulting from learning it at the secondary school (379 responses), and individual interests (281 responses). The next topic group included students' expectations associated with the academic staff, teaching facilities, library sources, geographic and cartographic collections, the organization and contents of the field activities as well as the atmosphere of studying at the particular university. The students, in general, quite well estimated the academic staff.

Nevertheless, the estimation itself slightly varied at different academic institutions. The best rates were associated with the academic staff of the Jagiellonian University, the University of Warsaw, and the weakest rates were given to the provincial universities, such as: Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce, and the Pomeranian Academy in Slupsk. As the best attitude of the academic staff towards the students was mentioned by students, from the Jagiellonian University, the University of Warsaw and Jan Kochanowski University. The teaching facilities were rated as the best ones at the Jagiellonian University and the Pedagogical University in Cracow, a bit worse in the Pomeranian Academy and the University of Warsaw. The academic resources of the library in the sphere of Geography and cartographic collections were well evaluated by students of all academic institutions. Also, the organization and the contents of local and regional field activities were rated at the very high level by the responding students.

However, the atmosphere of studying received the highest rates in the estimation according to students' responds (Figure 2).

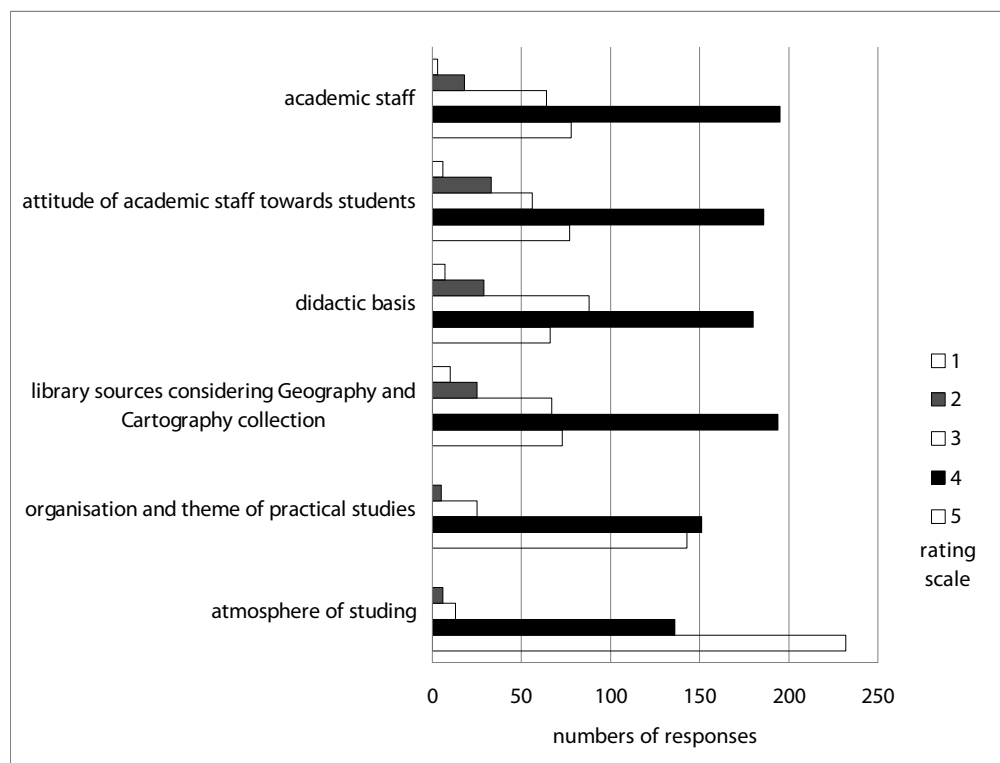


Figure 2: Students' expectations in the field of studying geography.

The last topic group of our research was linked to issue of mastery the competencies during the course of geographical studies and plans for the future. The students from some academic institutions, namely, the Jagiellonian University, the University of Warsaw, Maria Curie - Skłodowska University referred to the analysis of the statistical data as the best acquired skills during the course of geographical studies. Furthermore, the students from the Jagiellonian University, the University of Warsaw, Maria Curie - Skłodowska University and Pedagogical University in Cracow distinguished the skill of preparing charts, profiles and maps as the well-acquired. Nevertheless, the worst mastered skill applied to the ability of using IT and GIS (Figure 3).

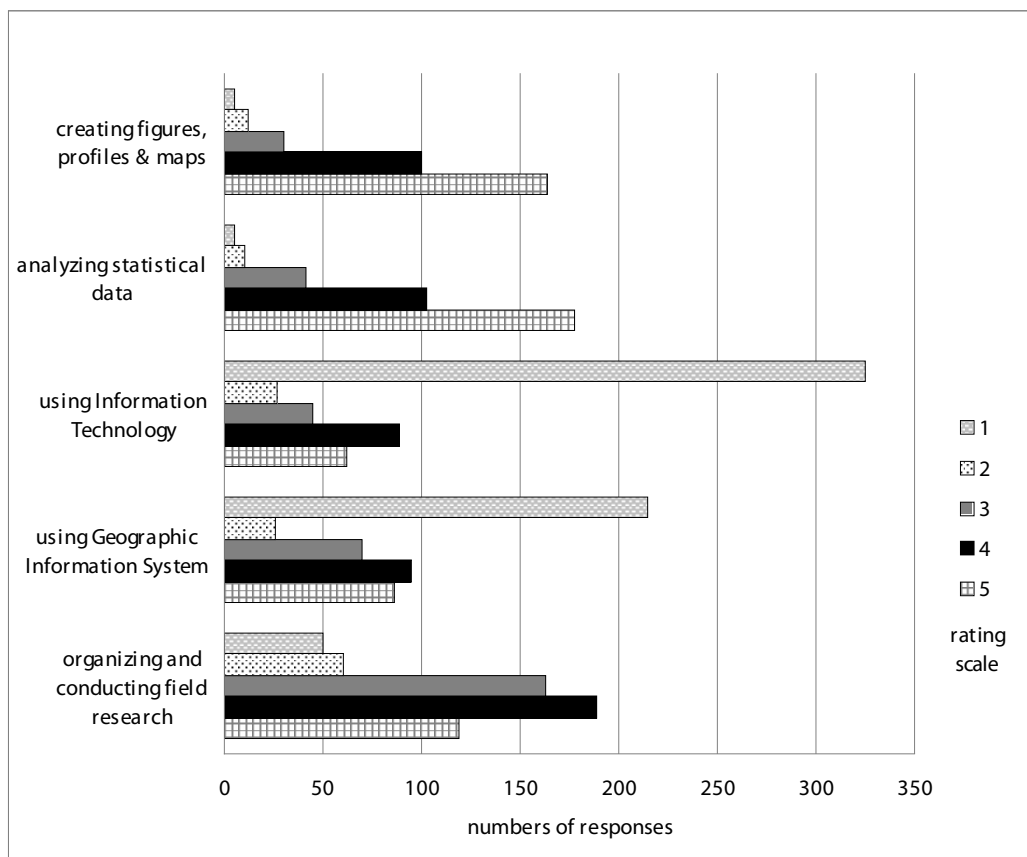


Figure 3: Evaluation of acquired skills by students during geographical studies.

As the research showed that students declared that they would continue further education on the MSc course (more than a half), which appears to be very optimistic and indicated the great popularity of Geography as a subject of studies. Unfortunately, only 16 people related to the further doctoral studies of Geography (8 people from the Jagiellonian University, 5 from the University of Warsaw and 3 from Jan Kochanowski University), moreover, 84 people wanted to continue their education abroad. The rest of the respondents wanted to start working.

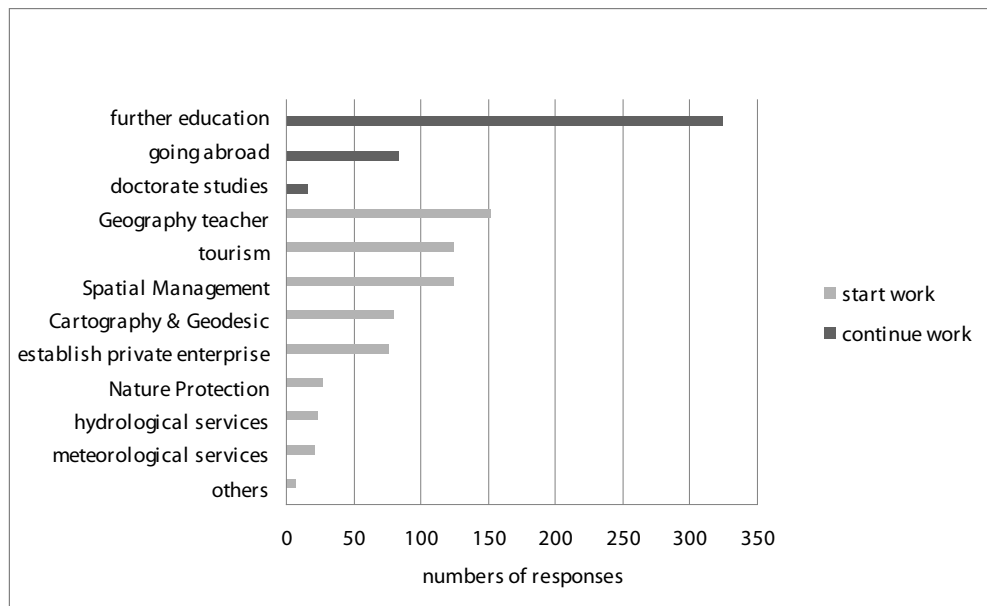


Figure 4: Future plans of the students.

According to the ranking (Figure 4), most Geography students decided to become Geography teachers (152 people), however, it must be considered that the greatest number of the respondents was associated with the Pedagogical University in Cracow, the Pomeranian Academy, Jan Kochanowski University, therefore, the academic institutions educating mainly teachers. The students of Geography wanted to work in tourism and land management (145 and 144), in the cartography and geodesy (134 people) and to start their own businesses (126 people).

Discussion

It must be highlighted that there were no studies similar to the demonstrated ones that referred to geography students covering such a large scale of the research. Although they specifically were associated with the reasons of choosing the geographical studies as such and the students' competences considering particular branches of geographical studies, it is important to state that there were only individual publications. Therefore, the investigations dealing with the reason why students selected geographical studies, were conducted at several academic centers in Poland (King, 2007; Podgorski, Tyszkowski, Stanczyk, 2008) but they did not face the entire issue. All the same, the situation with the research concerning the employment of the geography graduates appears to be similar (Borowiec, 2002). For that reason again it can be claimed that there is deficient in the complete estimation of the problem. On the other hand, the significant tests that monitor the world's interest in geographical studies in relation to the job opportunities are systematically carried out outside Poland (Haeley, 1989; Clark, Healey, Kennedy, 1990; Clark, Higgitt, 1997). The initial diagnosis considering the problem of selecting geographical studies can indicate that there is a systematic decrease in the number of the candidates that want to study such courses. Furthermore, in the daily newspapers, one can read articles suggesting that the school graduates should not apply for geographical studies since it is not very attractive nowadays. Therefore, in relation to the anticipation of such serious changes, in the European higher educational system it is necessary to carry out the research so as to prepare and introduce

the Bologna Declaration to the educational process of the future graduates in geographical studies. In the realization of the vision of Europe of Knowledge, the key element is to initiate geographical studies concerning various disciplinary field and specializations. It would allow to provide the job opportunities in the constantly changing market in the range of the employment. Therefore, the continuation of the studies and their relations with the current situation in Poland will determine the trends in the sphere of acknowledging the attractiveness of geographical studies in Poland in comparison to other countries, e.g., the UK, the USA, and the possibility of their employment there. Moreover, further investigation will allow to identify both the favorable and limiting factors that influence the choice of undertaking the geographical studies as well as will guarantee better job opportunities for graduates of such courses. The market, today, requires the variety of skills from the university graduates, therefore, there is a need for the research among the employers. It will allow to establish the way of perceiving the geography and will provide the information dealing with the expected competencies that students acquire during the geographical studies. The data collected from employers and the analysis of the market will generate the set of competencies and areas of employment for the geographers. The collected results of the research will agree to introduce changes in the range of the competences and skill, which could be desirable in order to find a job. The analysis of the new areas of the economy in which geography graduates have the opportunity to find work, will contribute to the verification of the employment and the existing views dealing with the job opportunities for the geographers.

Conclusions

The presented analysis of the popularity in the sphere of geographical studies in Poland allows to create some generalizations. On the basis of the research, it is distinguished that some psychological factors have a significant influence on the popular fields of studies. The psychological element effecting the choice, as well as the main factors which determine the selection of the geographical studies are established according to: the close distance from home, the possibility of the specialization of the personal choice, the prestige of academic institution in rankings, the family tradition. The academic staff was highly estimated according to the respondents who referred to the content-related and didactic values. They also provided the high rates in terms of the education facilities, library resources, and cartographic collections. However, considerably more carefully, the academic staff should regard the geographical competences, such as: the use of IT and GIS programs as well as to introduce the competences of Geography graduates to the employers. The evaluation of the professional competences of the geographer, and the identification of the new areas of employing geographers in the sector of the economy, should help academic institutions develop new studying strategies appropriate to the present and future job opportunities on the market.

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