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**STUDENTS TOWARDS ENTERPRISE  
(RESULTS OF A SURVEY OF ATTITUDES  
AND OPINIONS OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS  
IN POLAND, THE CZECH REPUBLIC  
AND SLOVAKIA)**

## Introduction

Entrepreneurial skills are treated as a fundamental factor in economic development and wealth of nations. Maintaining high tempos of economic growth, raising living standards and eliminating cultural differences between Central European countries depends, to a large extent, on the attitudes and behaviour of entrepreneurs, especially the young and educated ones<sup>1</sup>.

I understand enterprise as various activities of people, acting both individually and in teams, which consist in noticing any opportunities to create new values in their environment.

All graduates are potential entrepreneurs, and some of them are “intellectual entrepreneurs”<sup>2</sup>, whose role in the knowledge-based and information-based economy seems to be particularly important. Their part can be decisive in meeting the above mentioned challenges, which the new members of the European Union are facing. Based on such an assumption, a survey of universities of economics in Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia was designed, the aim of the survey being to identify and to compare the attitudes of young people and their opinions about:

- attitude towards business and businessmen in each of the above named countries,
- readiness to start one’s own business,
- business conditions in the three countries,
- self-diagnosis of selected personality features essential for starting one’s own business,
- the degree to which the respondents’ universities prepare them to do business.

In this paper I have presented some results of the survey in the three countries. On the basis of this survey I will attempt to draw conclusions referring mainly to university education and to shaping the conditions for the growth of enterprise.

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<sup>1</sup> The conditions for the development of enterprise. In: T. Kraśnicka: *Koncepcja rozwoju przedsiębiorczości ekonomicznej i pozaekonomicznej* (The Concept of Economic and Social Entrepreneurship). AE, Katowice 2002.

<sup>2</sup> See: S. Kwiatkowski: *Przedsiębiorczość intelektualna* (Intellectual Entrepreneurship). PWN, Warsaw 2000.

## 1. Methods of surveying and the characteristics of the population under study

To carry out the survey, a special questionnaire, including 26 questions and some demographic and social data, has been prepared<sup>3</sup>.

The total number of the surveyed university students was 861, of whom 237 were Polish students, 388 – Czech students and 236 Slovak ones<sup>4</sup>. Most of the Czech and Slovak students were women (around 60%), while among the Polish students there was a slight male majority (52% of the people surveyed).

The age of the respondents varied from 20 to 25 years, but among the Polish students the younger ones were more numerous (90% – aged 21 or younger), and the Czech and Slovak ones were slightly older (about 25% were 24 and older).

As far as professional experience is concerned, up to 70% of the students said they had had some. The percentage of the Czech students with some professional experience was the highest (about 75%), the percentage of the Polish students was the lowest (60%). The differences in professional experience result from different ages of respondents. It should be stressed that approximately every second student surveyed comes from the social circles where some family members (parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters) run a business, which makes it possible to the students to stay in touch with a ‘real’ businessman. The highest percentage of the students from enterprising families has been in the Czech Republic (around 65%), whereas in Poland and in Slovakia fewer than 50% admitted that they had a businessman in their family.

## 2. Survey results

### 2.1. Perception of the phenomenon of enterprise

From the options presented (setting up a firm, embarking on a venture, organising and managing a firm, taking risks, managing change and innovation in

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<sup>3</sup> The questionnaire was published in T. Krašnicka: *Poznavani potencialu zacinajicihu podnikatele* (Getting to know the potential of start-up businessmen). In: Z. Mikolas a kol. *Podnikani a synergie* (Entrepreneurship and Synergy). Repronis, Ostrava 2002).

<sup>4</sup> The survey in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia was carried out by a team headed by Professor Ladislav Ludvik [Katedra Podnikohospodarska, Vysoka skola banska – Technicka univerzita (University of Technology) in Ostrava].

reaction to the opportunities created by the environment, making efforts to increase the capital), those surveyed most often associated enterprise with:

- organising and managing a firm (46.0% of respondents),
- taking risks (31.7%),
- embarking on a venture (31.4%).

The lowest percentage of the people surveyed (less than 13%) have associated the notion of enterprise with creating new values. At the same time it must be underlined that considerable differences exist between the answers given by the students from different countries; the answers given by the Poles were different particularly often. These Polish students usually associate enterprise with:

- embarking on a venture (61.2%),
- introducing innovations (46.4%),
- taking risks (35%).

Paying attention to these differences, it is worth underlying that only 1.7% of the Polish students pointed to creating new values as a primary feature of enterprise, while there were 18% of such opinions among the Czech students and 15.3% among the Slovak ones.

Similar differences have been noticed in the case of the students' opinions referring to the possibility of carrying out some entrepreneurial activities in big companies. If we take the whole surveyed population into consideration, we'll see that most of them have said that entrepreneurial skills might be displayed in a big company (almost 52%), but the Czech students showed to be the most sceptical ones (only 34.5% of affirmative answers) and the Slovak ones – only slightly less so (almost 48% of affirmative answers). At the same time, as many as 84% of Polish students are convinced that entrepreneurial attitudes are possible in big corporations as well.

It is an interesting thing how the students foresee their own careers in connection with enterprise. Altogether 90% of the people surveyed see their future in some business units (profit oriented organisations) out of whom a little above 44% – in a small business, and 45% – in a big company. There are certain differences in the surveyed people's preferences. The Polish and Czech students would like to work for big corporations (52.3% and 46.1% of those surveyed respectively). But the Slovak students prefer small firms (over 55% of the people surveyed).

The answers to a question about setting up one's own firm after having graduated do not quite correspond to the results presented above. Affirmative answers to this question were given by 37.6% of the surveyed, but there was a relatively high percentage of undecided answers (33.8%). It should be stressed that the percentage of undecided answers was the highest among the Polish stu-

dents (over 40%), which may be easily understood, since the Polish students were the youngest category of the respondents (year two at university). A certain asymmetry between the answers to this question and the answers to the previous one was seen in the case of the Slovakian students out of whom 55% see their own future in a small firm, but merely 41% declare a willingness to set up such a firm. We may come to the conclusion that some of the people surveyed hope to find a job in small business but not necessarily in a business of their own. The opinions of the Czech students were similar. In the case of the Polish students, among whom the largest part – as many as 42.6% – declared a willingness to set up a firm, only 34% would like to work for small businesses in future. We have to do with a certain inconsistency of the answers, which proves that the people's plans for the future are not well thought over yet.

## **2.2. Students about a businessman**

Students perceive a businessman as the one who seizes opportunities (85.5% of the surveyed), the proportion of such answers about the entrepreneur's attributes being the highest among the Czech students (93.3%) and the lowest – among the Polish students (74.3%). Other attributes of the entrepreneur, perceived to be less important, are e.g. 'making money' (46.9%) and 'innovating' (42%). The answers given by the students to some other questions seem to stress the fact that there still are some misunderstandings as far as the entrepreneur's characteristics are concerned. He is often thought to be an inventor (nearly 30% of the surveyed). The students sometimes emphasise it that 'you need to be a natural born businessman' (26.4%).

## **2.3. Conditions for the growth of enterprise**

Most of the people surveyed share the opinion that in their countries the economic conditions for the growth of enterprise (especially the SME) are favourable or quite favourable (77%). In this matter there were certain differences in views: among the Czech students 84.3% expressed such an opinion, whereas among the Polish ones only 62.9%. About 20% of the students judged the conditions for the growth of enterprise to be definitely negative, but among the Polish students there were as many as 32.5% of such opinions.

Among the specified possible barriers to the growth of enterprise (such as high interest rates, high taxes, unfair competition, corruption and bureaucracy),

the students usually pointed to corruption (46.8% of all respondents) and to bureaucracy (44.3%). Some differences in answers are worth mentioning:

- the Czech students named bureaucracy the number one obstacle to entrepreneurial spirit, ahead of corruption; the students from Slovakia did the other way round,
- the Polish students – just like the Slovaks – put corruption on the first place, but they put high taxes on the second.

At the same time the students believe economic conditions to be a decisive factor for the growth of enterprise (80%). Among the remaining factors, politics was pointed at most often (48% of the respondents) ahead of personality features (41%).

## **2.4. Students' self-esteem as a factor potentially favourable to enterprise**

A definite majority of all the students (61%) believe themselves to be creative, full of ideas and open to changes. At the same time as many as 32% of them are unable to decide how creative they are and merely 7% thought themselves not to be creative at all. If we compare the three national groups, the most considerable is the gap between the Poles (only 52.7% believed themselves to be creative people) and the Slovaks (almost 70% of the respondents underlined their own creativity).

Greatest cohesion of answers was stated in the case of the question: Do you appreciate independence in what you do? As many as 87.6% of those surveyed answered affirmatively. When there was the matter of setting oneself ambitious and difficult goals, only below 45% of the surveyed gave an affirmative answer, and one third did not have any opinion about that. Here there were no major differences between the answers given by students of different nationalities.

A similar cohesion of answers was also seen in the case of the question about readiness to take some risks (personal or financial) in order to assure oneself a good position in professional and private life: as many as 71% of the students expressed such a readiness (24% were not able to answer this question).

In an answers to the question: Are you an architect of your own future? about three quarters of the students (73.4%) expressed a conviction that their own future depends first of all on them. About 18% were unable to answer this question. It was noticed that among the Polish students the percentage of those convinced that they could definitely influence their own fate was a little lower.

Generally, the students believe themselves to be full of enterprise – this was the opinion of almost 80% of those surveyed.

Among the summarising questions, there was one referring to chances of at least a moderate professional success in the few coming years (taking also the country's entry into the European Union into account). On the basis of their opinion about the social and economic situation of each country, 80% of the people surveyed expressed their optimism (the answers "definitely yes" or "probably yes"). About 18% of the respondents seem not to hope to be even moderately successful professionally. The biggest pessimists are the Slovak students, which might be connected with that country's economic situation, relatively worse than the Czech Republic's or Poland's.

The last question in the questionnaire: Do universities teach students entrepreneurial skills? unfortunately could not be answered by as many as 50% (exactly the same figure in each of the three countries surveyed). Only about 26% of the people surveyed answered affirmatively, the greatest optimists being the Slovak students (32.6%, unlike the Polish students – of whom only 18% said yes).

### **3. Summary and final conclusions**

From the comparative analysis of the students' attitudes and opinions about selected aspects of enterprise in the countries surveyed, we may infer that we deal with a large coherence of the opinions about most of the questions concerned. Opinions of the students from Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia are very similar, and in many matters just identical. From our survey we can draw a conclusion that young people – regardless of their country – perceive the phenomenon of enterprise and conditions for its growth in quite a similar way. The same is their perception of their own "enterprise potential" or their vision of future (in business). Young people are to a moderate degree interested in career path.

The greatest similarity of the students' opinions concerned their ways of perceiving and evaluating:

- professional career connected with business organisations (90% of the surveyed would like to join their future with a company, particularly a big one),
- barriers to the development of enterprise (e.g. a large majority of those surveyed pointed to corruption and bureaucracy as barriers to enterprise),
- the factors influencing the development of enterprise (the greatest agreement referred to economic and political factors),

- one's own 'enterprise potential' (the only thing there was no agreement about was one's creativity assessment),
- the ethics of business (the results of the survey referring to this topic have not been presented in this paper)<sup>5</sup>.

Next, certain divergences of opinions of the students surveyed referred to questions such as:

- understanding the phenomenon of enterprise (the Czech and Slovak students more often associated enterprise with organising the activities of a small firm and managing it; the Polish students took a wider look of this phenomenon as a process of carrying out projects and introducing innovations),
- corporate enterprise (a vast majority of the Polish students believe it to be possible to develop this type of enterprise; the Czech and Slovak students question such an opinion or find it difficult to express any opinion here),
- setting up one's own firm after having graduated (such a declaration was made by nearly 42% of both Polish and Slovak students; but by 10% fewer Czech respondents),
- viewing the conditions promoting the development of enterprise in a given country, especially the growth of small and medium enterprises; as many as one third of the Polish students thought them to be unfavourable; whereas among the Czech and Slovak students such an opinion was only expressed by 13-15%.

Conclusions resulting from the survey, which after all provides only information based on people's oral statements, should always be drawn with a lot of prudence. It is however difficult not to point to a number of alarming signals which result from our research. Particularly worth thinking over are the students' views concerning:

- critical opinions about the conditions for the growth of enterprise, particularly for small and medium enterprises,
- corruption as one of strong barriers to the growth of enterprise,
- stereotyped images of businessmen ("entrepreneur is an inventor" or "you need to be a natural born entrepreneur"),
- ethics of business.

The students' views are, to some extent, a reflection of dominating social climates which only to a small degree promote enterprise. The students' convictions presented in the survey may make it more difficult to them to start a business. Another problem is how well the students are really prepared to start it.

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<sup>5</sup> Almost a half of the people surveyed – regardless of their nationality – passed a negative judgement of the business people for their disrespect of ethical rules.



A question is born: How much knowledge, skills and inspiration for choosing a business career does a university provide?

On the basis of the survey, some conclusions have been drawn. In the field of educating it is necessary, among others, to:

- modify the university curricula in order to broaden the knowledge of theoretical and practical aspects of business, to enable students to better understand this phenomenon and the conditions for its development as well as to acquire skills necessary to carry out projects,
- make it possible for students to get in touch with business and non-business organisations in practice,
- improve the methods of teaching in order to activate students more and stimulate their creativity, self-assurance, to inspire and mobilise them to set themselves difficult and ambitious targets.

The conclusion of our research is that, in general, young people's attitude to enterprise and to businessmen seems to be a positive one, although, as marked above, some of the students' opinions should arouse our incertitude. The respondents are aware of numerous barriers to the development of enterprise and many negative phenomena in social and economic life, which to a smaller or larger extent influence any business activities. This means that the present business conditions are judged rather unfavourably, especially in Poland.

So, to encourage future graduates to undertake enterprising activities it is indispensable to continue to reform economic policies, tax systems, and also to deregulate economy, and to fight corruption above all.

The results of our research pay also attention to the cultural context of enterprise and cultural differences between individual countries. We can ask a question: Are these, so similar, attitudes and opinions of the young people from different countries portraying the processes of cultural unification being an effect of progress in globalisation? Perhaps it is justified (having joined forces with sociologists) to start investigating this problem?

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