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Higher education and non-traditional students. Strategies of higher education institutions in the area of adult education - based on example of post-graduate studies

Lifelong Learning has become an important aspect of contemporary education. Post-graduate studies provide training of highly qualified personnel capable of responding to the challenges of knowledge-based economy which requires continuing skills development. Moreover, the area of adult education is one of the strategic challenges listed in the account of priorities for the European Higher Education Area up to the year 2020. In Poland, lifelong learning is nevertheless still at a very small range (Eurostat 2006 and 2011), research also shows that participation in it is characterized by high selectivity, among others, because of their age (Social Diagnosis 2013). In the quoted context following question needs to be addressed - whether (and to what extent) different types of higher education institutions in Poland are ready to respond to the *lifelong learning* challenge.

The main goal of my study was to present different institutional strategies undertaken by Polish higher education institutions (HEI) in reference to post-graduate (non-degree) education and their potential to develop this area of activity. It is based on the assumption that different categories of HEI respond differently due to their distinct profile and available resources.

The main hypotheses assumed that although different higher education institutions have similar policies in the field of adult education in terms of the declared strategies the clear differences between the various segments of these institutions exist in implementing these policies: defining and relations with key groups of stakeholders, shaping the educational offer, the selection of teaching staff, etc. The study was conducted on eleven institutions of higher education (intentional attempt). They represented key segments of higher education institutions, chosen on the basis of two strategic criteria: form of financing (public - private) and institutional profile (research - didactic). Qualitative study based on a set of complementary techniques (individual depth interviews, survey interviews, content analysis) and data obtained from three complementary sources: representatives of the university authorities, faculty of the postgraduate studies and their students. As a result it enabled the creation of a comprehensive picture composed of complementary prospects of the three key groups of stakeholders, based on this, it will be possible to present the conclusions on the strategy of universities in the field of adult education - at both levels: the declaration and implementation. As a theoretical frame to analyze gathered data *resource dependence theory* was used.

The research project based on an interdisciplinary perspective (drawing primarily from sociology, but also from management studies, pedagogy). Results obtained in the process of research, provided knowledge useful not only for further scientific research. They may also have important meaning for authors of regulations created e.g. by the Ministry of Education and Science.