

Reasons for choosing geography studies. Comparative analysis of two academic centres: Warsaw and Kielce

Abstract

The objective of this paper is to compare the reasons for choosing a degree in geography by students starting their studies in two academic centres: Warsaw and Kielce. The first is a big city with rich traditions and one of the best academic centres in Poland, while the second is regional, much smaller but developing. In the research, special attention was paid to the reasons for choosing geography as a major, a variety of ideas considering future job and professional prospects open to geography graduates as well as attitudes toward the profession of a geography teacher. The research involved interviews with first and second-year students in both centres.

Keywords

Academic centres Warsaw and Kielce • geography studies • reasons

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Introduction

One of elements of the higher education reform introduced by the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education at the beginning of September 2011 imposes on universities an obligation to monitor the professional prospects of their graduates. This action is intended to help education to adapt to the labour market, as well as improve integration of universities into their social and economic environments¹. For these reasons, it is interesting to consider the reasons behind how young people choose a degree major. What influences the decisions made by secondary senior school graduates regarding a given major? What are their expectations of their studies and what are their professional plans for the future? Answers to these questions, when compared with the actual professional history of graduates of the particular degree programmes, could allow better assessment of the importance of a particular field of science as well as the importance of a particular academic centre in the social and economic life of a given region, or even the whole country.

To date, the reasons for choosing geography as a degree subject have been researched in a few academic centres in Poland, including Krakow (Osuch 1999, Borowiec 2006, Wójtowicz 2011),

Kielce (Król 2007) and Sosnowiec (Hibszer 2009). These studies had a diagnostic character – they presented the situation in a particular centre, and their scope was regional². This paper presents the results of comparative research which looked at the reasons for choosing geography by students taking up education in two academic centres: Warsaw, a big city with rich traditions and one of the best academic centres in Poland, and Kielce which is a regional centre that is much smaller than Warsaw, but is developing. The research was based on students enrolled at the Faculty of Geography and Regional Studies of the University of Warsaw (the WGiSR; “the Warsaw students”) and the Institute of Geography of Jan Kochanowski University of Humanities and Sciences in Kielce (IG UJK; “the Kielce students”).

¹ Information on higher education reform is available on the website of MNiSW <http://www.nauka.gov.pl/szkolnictwo-wyzsze/reforma-szkolnictwa-wyzszego/>

² It should be mentioned that at the moment, wider research concerning reasons for choosing geography as a degree subject is being carried out at a few academic centres in Poland under the supervision of A. Hibszer and M. Tracz. Initial results were presented in November 2011 during the didactic conference “Present challenges of Geographers university education vs. school education” in Toruń but a full report has not been published yet. Research for a few centres in Poland has also been conducted under the supervision of B. Wójtowicz (2010, 2011) and the results of this research were presented during the Forum Geografów Polskich (Forum of Polish Geographers) in 2010 – “Popularność geografii jako kierunku studiów” dr hab. B. Wójtowicz prof. UP, dr M. Tracz.

Purpose and methods

Special attention was paid in the research to the reasons behind the choice of geography as a major and the variety of ideas and opinions on the future jobs and professions that could be practiced by geography graduates. In both centres, students have the opportunity to obtain teaching credentials so the students' attitudes towards the profession of geography teacher was also explored. The following detailed objectives were established for the study:

- To compare the reasons for studying geography by students in academic centres of both national and regional significance.
- To compare how these students perceive geographers.
- To compare how these students perceive opportunities for professional development after graduating with a degree in geography.

In order to identify and compare reasons for choosing geography as a major by students at both university centres, a survey of 172 first and second-year students on the bachelor's degree course was organised in the 2010/2011 academic year. The questionnaire was completed by 91 students from the faculty of Geography and Regional Studies at the University of Warsaw, of which 57 (60%) were women and 32 (40%) were men. The sample structure by gender reflects the proportion of female to male students in both centres.

The majority of the Warsaw students (82%) were inhabitants of cities, 10% were inhabitants of rural areas and the remaining 8% did not reveal where they lived. In terms of the region of origin of these students, the majority came from the Masovian Voivodeship (81%) and inhabitants of the Warsaw agglomeration dominated this group (52 people). The remaining students were inhabitants of Lublin Voivodeship (7%), Podlasie Voivodeship (2%) and a few were from the Silesian and Łódź Voivodeships.

As for the Warsaw students who took part in the study, inhabitants of cities also dominated the group of Kielce students surveyed (74%). The majority of these respondents came from the Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship (78%), some came from the Masovian (9%) and Podkarpackie Voivodeships (8%) and there was a handful of people from the Silesian, Lublin and Łódź Voivodeships.

A questionnaire consisting of eight questions was used in the research: five questions were open-ended and three were closed-ended.

Characteristics of the university centres

Geography has been a formal discipline at the University of Warsaw since 1918, when the Department of Geography at the Faculty of Geography and Regional Studies (WGiSR) was founded and which still functions at the University of Warsaw today (Richling 2008). Currently, there are two majors of academic degrees available at the WGiSR: Geography and Spatial Economy. During the 2010/2011 academic year there were 873 students studying both majors³, including 199 students in the first year of the bach-

³ Full time bachelor and master degree programmes. The total number of students of the Faculty is higher (extramural studies of bachelor and master degree programmes, as well as doctoral studies and postgraduate studies are conducted here).

elor's degree studies (126 people majoring in geography and 73 people in spatial economy). The WGiSR employed 136 scientific and didactic workers, which included 30 senior academics.

Geographic education in the second centre, the Institute of Geography of Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce, has a much shorter history than the WGiSR in Warsaw. Initially it was oriented towards preparing students to become teachers but when the Wyższa Szkoła Nauczycielska (Higher Teaching School) was established in Kielce in 1969, the geography department joined the Faculty of Mathematics and Nature. After six years it was transformed into an independent unit – the Institute of Geography. Kielce obtained university status in 2008 and now, as in Warsaw, at UJK education is conducted with a two-level system. The Institute of Geography runs a geography degree programme with specialisations in general geography, geography with tourism, geography with spatial economy and geography for teachers.

In the 2010/2011 academic year there were 407 students on the full time bachelor's and master's degree programmes at the Institute of Geography, and 77 students were admitted to the first year of the bachelor's degree programme. At the moment the Institute has 27 employees which includes seven senior academics.

These centres operate in very different social and economic environments. The University of Warsaw is in the largest Polish city with a population of 1.72 million people⁴, and is capital of both the whole country and the Masovian Voivodeship. Warsaw is a rich and dynamically developing economic and cultural centre and the Masovian Voivodeship as a whole is characterised by the highest economic indicators, as evident in its contribution to national GDP (21.9%, 293.9 billion PLN), which per capita is 160% of the national average⁵, and the lowest unemployment rate (9.5%) of all regions⁶. However, at the same time the Masovian Voivodeship is one of the most economically diverse voivodeships and the majority of its area is relatively weakly developed. Outside of the Warsaw agglomeration which is the most economically developed area in the country, the economy is based on agriculture and fruit picking. So the high economic indicators of the voivodeship as a whole are skewed by the influence of the Warsaw agglomeration which attracts investors and capital.

The Jan Kochanowski University is the biggest academic centre in Kielce, which is the capital of the Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship and located in the southern part of central Poland. It is the biggest city in the region and had a population of 203,000 in 2010. Its economy is based mostly on stone and ore mining, construction, ceramics and the machine industry as well as agriculture. The economic condition of the region is much worse than the Masovian Voivodeship above and in 2009, the GDP of the Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship amounted to 34.7 billion PLN, which accounts only for 2.6% of the GDP of Poland. The voivodeship

⁴ As of 31.12.2010 http://www.stat.gov.pl/gus/5840_6108_PLK_HTML.htm

⁵ Produkt Krajowy Brutto. Rachunki regionalne w 2009 r., 2011, GUS i USwK, Katowice

⁶ Monitoring rynku pracy. Miesięczna informacja o bezrobociu w Polsce w październiku 2011 roku, Departament Pracy, GUS

ranked 12th (out of 16 voivodships) for GDP per capita, at 80% of the national level⁷. At 14% in the third quarter of 2011, unemployment is also higher in the Świętokrzyskie Voivodship than the national average (11%)⁸.

Research results

Reasons for choosing geography as a degree subject

Analysis of the reasons students gave for choosing geography reveals that for the Kielce students, the reasons are more diverse than for the Warsaw students. Despite the fact that a willingness to develop interests dominates in both cases, a much smaller percentage of the Kielce students gave this reason (Fig. 1). A similar number of people in both cases consider their future profession when choosing geography as a major, although this is a much smaller percentage of students (see Fig. 1). The

Kielce students displayed a more diverse variety of motivations. Apart from the features of the subject of geography itself that were noted in similar proportions by the Warsaw students, important motivations for enrolling on a geography degree course included that the respondents studied geography at matura level (secondary senior school final exam), they found it easy to get on to this programme, the course offered the opportunity to travel and that they weren't admitted to another degree course or to another university. In case of the Warsaw students, these reasons were given much less frequently, although a new reason was introduced there which was related to the prestige of the university. In the case of choosing studies in the regional centre (Kielce), it emerged that it is the desire to obtain a higher education, which is not a significant motivation for the students from the national university centre (Warsaw), is much more important.

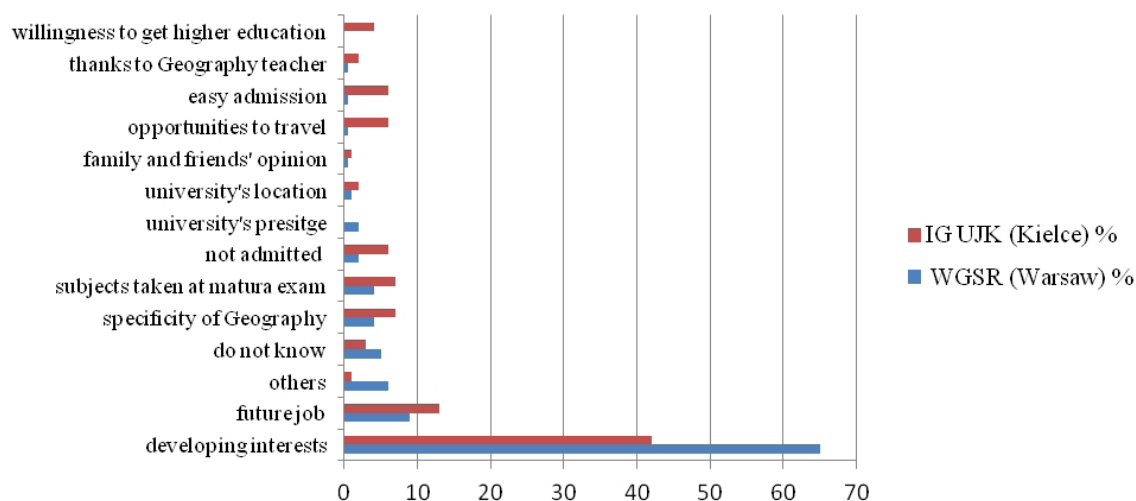


Fig 1. Reasons for choosing geography as a major

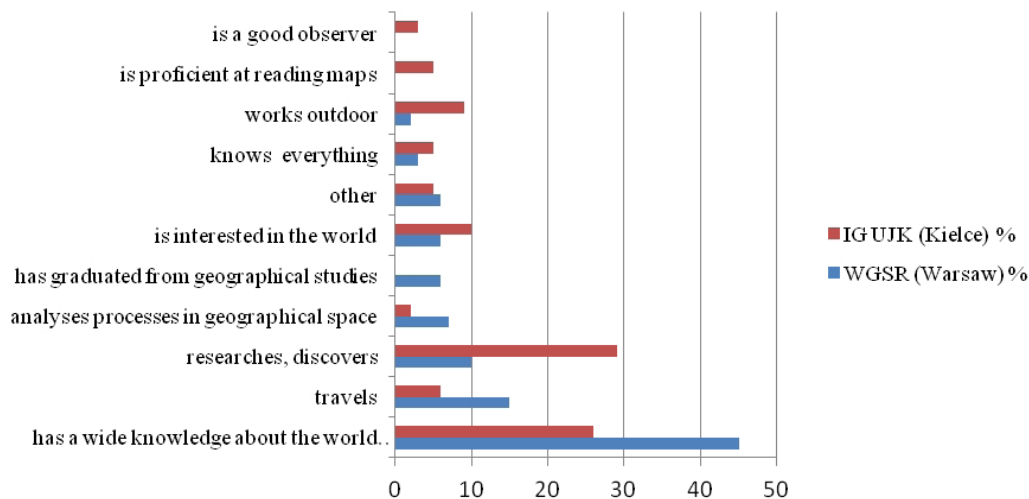


Fig 2. Ideas concerning geographers

⁷ Produkt Krajowy Brutto. Rachunki regionalne w 2009 r., 2011, GUS and USwK, Katowice

⁸ Monitoring rynku pracy. Miesięczna informacja o bezrobociu w Polsce w październiku 2011 roku, Departament Pracy, GUS

Ideas concerning Geographers

A high diversity in views on geographers was noted (see Fig. 2). Warsaw students were characterised by more diverse views than their colleagues from Kielce.

For the Warsaw students, a geographer is above all a person who has a wide knowledge about the world around them, as well as a person who travels, researches and discovers. Few people from this group thought of working outdoors as one of the qualities of a geographer.

For the Kielce students, a much higher percentage agreed that it was not only knowledge of the world around them but also the ability to research and discover that are qualities of a geographer. Further, the Kielce students attached more significance to working outdoors and abilities related to reading maps. Unfortunately, among both groups of students there were many answers in the category of “other” and included answers to the

effect that a geographer is a person who “is seeking a job, is unemployed, does not find a job in his profession, knows nothing”, but also more optimistic statements such as “is not bored” among them.

Professions that can be practiced after graduating with a degree in geography

Significant differences have also been observed in students’ perceptions of the professions that can be practiced after graduating with a degree in geography. Despite the fact that students from both Warsaw and Kielce name similar professions, there are significant differences in their choices (see Fig. 3). The Warsaw students perceive many more possibilities for practicing professions related to geography than the Kielce students and they note teaching, cartography and climatology as possible options, but

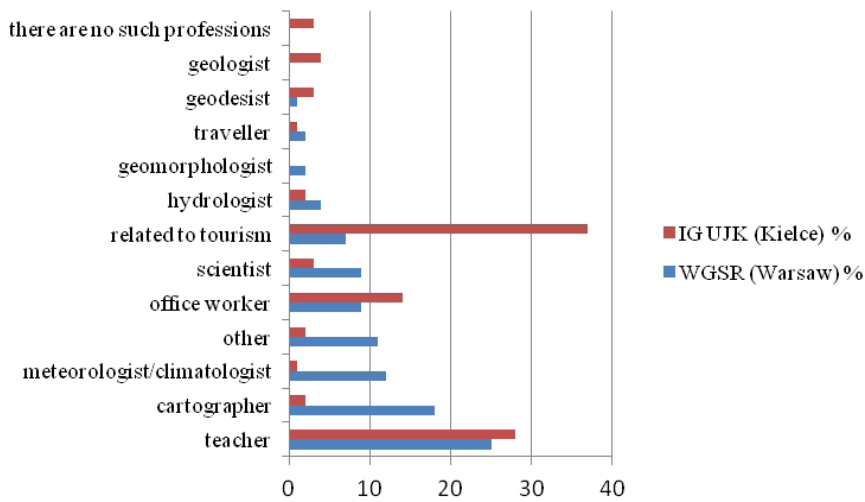


Fig 3. Professions which can be practiced after graduating in geography

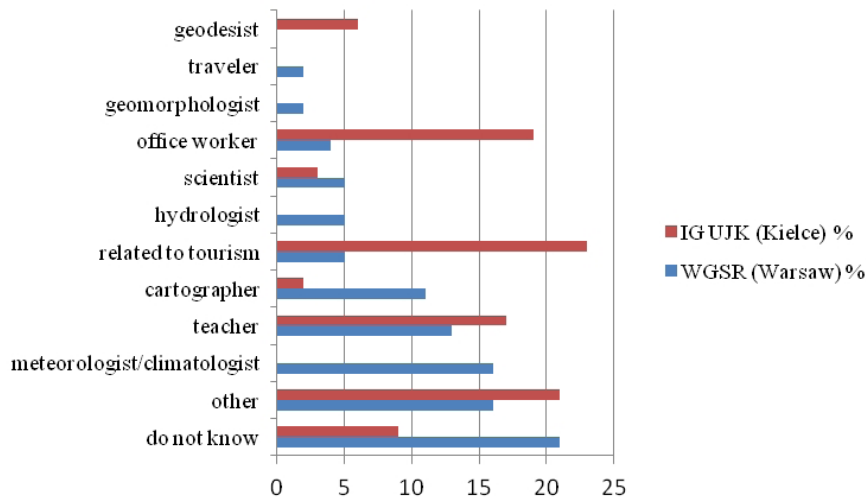


Fig 4. Professions with which the students associate their future

they also mention office worker, scientist, travel agency worker and travelling. Students from Kielce perceive fewer possible professions that can be practiced after graduating in geography and the most popular are a travel agency worker and a teacher as well as an office worker. The remaining occupations were mentioned only by a small group of people. Unfortunately there is also (an admittedly small) group of students who see no professions in the labour market that can be practiced by geography graduates.

Professions with which the students associate their future

Views on professions that the students would like to practice after graduation look rather different (see Fig. 4). The students of the regional university centre are much more optimistic and tended to see those professions that were possible for geography graduates as the same as those which will be practiced by them in the future. These are related with work in travel agencies, schools and offices, while professions unrelated to geography come in fourth place. Respondents who have not decided on their future profession account are the fifth largest group. Some individuals relate their future with such professions as surveyor, hotelier, scientist or cartographer.

Of the Warsaw students, a higher percentage, particularly among the male students, have not yet decided on their intended future profession. A significant proportion of these respondents

wanted to practice professions that are not related to geography. The profession of a meteorologist enjoys great popularity within this group, most of all among women, although a teacher or cartographer were mentioned less frequently. Some individuals relate their future with profession of a hydrologist, an office worker or with a job in tourism.

Profession – teacher

Analysis of the survey results shows that a higher number of the Warsaw students (34% of the respondents) imagine themselves as teachers compared with those from Kielce (22%) (see Fig. 5). In both cases, more people can see themselves as geography teachers than those who hope to find work in this profession.

Despite this, regardless of their own expectations, a large majority of respondents in both centres (62% of respondents in Warsaw, 52% in Kielce) wants to obtain teaching credentials⁹ (see Fig. 6), and this is particularly true for women.

Students also expressed a willingness to obtain the certification needed to practice other professions (see Fig. 7). Students from both groups mentioned most frequently certification related to the tourism industry i.e. to work as a guide, a tour guide or an entertainer. Some individuals also mentioned other qualifications, such as operating above-ground geodetic devices.

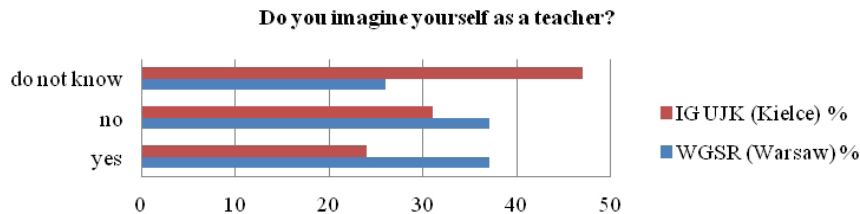


Fig 5. Do you imagine yourself as a geography teacher?

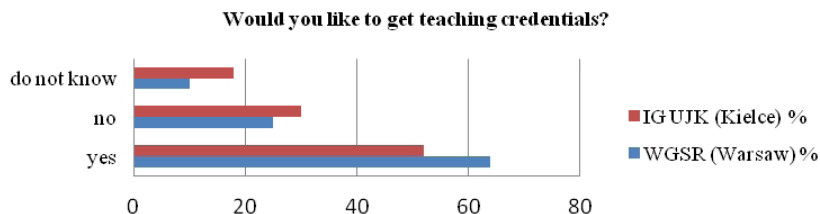


Fig 6. Willingness to obtain teaching credentials.

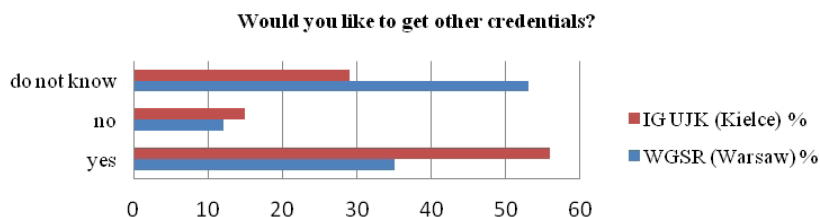


Fig 7. Willingness to obtaining the credentials to practice other professions

⁹ In Poland, passing a pedagogic module within a university degree course (consisting of pedagogy, psychology, subject didactics, a teaching internship and voice emission) is a condition for obtaining teaching credentials.

Summary

Developing one's interests is the most important reason for taking up geography for students both in Warsaw and Kielce, but this reason is more significant for the Warsaw students. For students from Kielce, the reasons for choosing to study geography were more diverse and the fact that the subject was taken at high school, a willingness to travel, getting a higher education and easy admittance to university turned out to be more important. There is a difference of views between the two groups of respondents regarding the qualities that characterise a geographer. Students from Warsaw believe that it is not only wide knowledge, but also the ability to research and discover that characterises geographers. Students from Warsaw also attach more importance to travelling, whereas those from the regional centre emphasise working outdoors and a good sense of direction.

There is also a strong difference in perceptions between the two groups of students of the professions that can be practiced after graduating in geography. Geography students from Warsaw mention many more possibilities, including being a teacher, a cartographer, a meteorologist, an office worker, a scientist and a travel agency worker. In the case of students from Kielce, the answers are limited to three professions: a travel agency worker, a teacher and an office worker. Some of the people from this group were not able to point out any profession that could be practiced after graduating in geography.

The students' hopes for their future professions shows a high variability. Students from Kielce have a much more positive attitude and mention those professions which they consider can

be practiced, namely a travel agency worker, a teacher and an office worker. Students from Warsaw have different perceptions of their future and this group is characterised by stronger indecisiveness and higher willingness to practice professions unrelated with geography.

A much higher percentage of students from Warsaw see themselves as teachers, and women dominate in this group.

Regardless of the views on their own capabilities of practicing the profession of a teacher, a significant majority of respondents in both groups expressed willingness to obtain teaching credentials.

Students in Kielce declared a willingness to obtain other certifications much more frequently, while students from Warsaw were, on the whole, undecided. The necessary certification to practice such professions as guides, tour guides as well as the operation of above-ground geodetic devices were mentioned most frequently.

This analysis allows us to conclude that the majority of the students who take up geography at degree level expect to become prepared to practice a certain profession. These expectations are higher in case of the students from Kielce (a regional university centre) than those from Warsaw (a national university centre).

The results presented concern students in a national and a regional university centre in Poland. Geography programmes at degree level are also conducted in other centres, sometimes with a long history and it would be very interesting to investigate students' attitudes in these places.

English translation: Agata Wilińska

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