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The Role of Edu-Tourism Financed by European Union Funds for the Development of Vocational Education in Poland

Abstract

The change of political system in Poland after 1989 caused a recession in vocational education supported and maintained by state-owned enterprises. At present vocational education is in a phase of revival, therefore, the European Union, perceiving the benefits of its development, has launched a number of initiatives aimed at enriching the educational offer and raising the level of education. However, besides improving professional skills, it is also important for young Europeans to acquire a number of additional competences such as mobility, decision-making skills, and adaptability to new conditions that will allow them to gain a competitive advantage in the labor market. Such an opportunity is provided by educational tourism, and the European Union, perceiving the advantages from this type of journey, has been promoting educational mobility projects for many years. In the current budget period, the Erasmus plus program, whose idea is to increase knowledge and professional aptitudes, and to support the modernization of teaching and training systems, has been implemented. The main aim of the article is to show the impact of educational travels financially supported by the European Union on the development of vocational education in Poland. The study was conducted by analyzing available source documents and reports. The research helped to create a set of intangible results gained by participants of Erasmus plus projects, and it indicated the benefits from this program for the whole vocational education. In this paper, Polish and English literature review in the field of vocational education, Erasmus plus program and educational tourism has been made, conclusions were presented and implications for the future research were formulated.

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Key words: vocational education; Erasmus plus, educational tourism.

Introduction

Sequence of events caused by the change of political system and transformation from a centrally planned economy to a market economy after 1989 resulted in a significant reduction in vocational education in Poland.

By the early 1990s, schools were supported and maintained by state-owned enterprises that were supposed to guarantee the employment of graduates. The intention of the socialist schools was not only to provide education for all, but primarily to create opportunities for young people from families with lower socioeconomic status (Barański 2011, 222). However, vocational education was characterized by inertia, lack of flexibility and weak correspondence between educational fields of studies and the needs of the labor market. Therefore, after the systemic transformation, vocational education began to decline both in quality and quantity. In that time in Poland there was a period of educational boom, which was connected with the development of general education and the undertaking of higher education by a large number of youth. Nevertheless, the decline of vocational schools has caused tensions in the labor market. Employers complained about the lack of employees with appropriate professional skills, while young people with higher education were employed in positions where they could not fully take advantage of the knowledge and skills gained in college (Worek 2012, 265).

At present, vocational education is in a phase of revival, thus, the interest of learners in the allocation of their intellectual resources to this type of education is noticeable. The aim of contemporary vocational training is to prepare young people to function in the changing labor market. The task of schools and other organizations providing vocational training is to develop not only competences and qualifications connected with a specific profession but also to form intangible assets that will allow young people to gain an advantage in the competitive and dynamically changing labor market.

Both personal and social competences, as well as the knowledge and practical experience related to the future occupation, can be developed by students of secondary vocational schools during educational trips funded by EU funds.

In the current budgetary perspective 2014–2020, a new Erasmus plus program has been launched. This project is consistent with the idea of supporting countries

participating in the program to take advantage of the potential of social capital and promote the idea of lifelong learning in an effective way.

The main aim of the article is to show the impact of the Erasmus plus program financially supported by the European Union on the development of vocational education in Poland. The study was conducted by analyzing available source documents.

1. The Concept of Educational Tourism

Europe is the continent where the first educational trips were born – namely, the Grand Tour. The first mention of this kind of journey appeared during the Renaissance, when young aristocrats and European intellectuals traveled to the most important centers of culture and science to learn and develop good manners. Such trips were a combination of several elements, such as school education, self-education, practice and observation (Starczewska 2016, 172).

After the First World War the borders were sealed, therefore traveling for educational purposes was much more difficult. The revival of educational travel dates back to the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries. At that time, through the liberalization of border crossing legislation, citizens of the European Union were given the opportunity to move freely. The European Union, which aims to shape the knowledge society, has launched a number of initiatives aimed at broadening the competences and skills of young people outside its borders. These activities have had a positive impact both on the development of intellectual assets of young people and educational tourism.

Globalization, whose consequence is an operative shrinkage of time and space, also favors the widespread mobility of citizens. In the contemporary world mobility has become a highly regarded and desirable value. Immobility in a world characterized by dynamic and perpetual changes leads to social exclusion, therefore, people who are extraterritorial and who move on intercontinental trajectories become fully global. After the era of industrialization and urbanization, there is the era of high technology and mass tourism, where more and more people connect traveling with educational, cultural, business, sports or religious activities (Galas 2014, 122–123).

Historically, it can be concluded that educational tourism is not a new concept in Europe. Despite this, few researchers have attempted to investigate this phenomenon in the literature. This may be due to the fact that the autotelic aim of the educational

travels is to acquire new knowledge, whereas mobility as a component of educational tourism only allows to fulfil its primary objectives.

David Bodger (1998, 28) defines educational tourism as a “program in which participants travel to a location as a group with the primary purpose of engaging in a learning experience directly related to the location”. This conceptualization is narrow, imprecise and mainly refers to ecotourism, heritage tourism and rural tourism. The first comprehensive overview of educational tourism can be found in Brent W. Ritchie (2003) handbook. His concept is synthetic and it will be applied in the following analysis. According to B.W. Ritchie (2003, 18), “educational tourism can be defined as a tourist activity undertaken by those who are undertaking an overnight vacation and those who are undertaking an excursion for whom education and learning is a primary or secondary part of their trip. These can include general educational tourism and adult study tours, international and domestic university and school students’ travel, including language schools, school excursions and exchange programs”.

At present educational tourism is starting to become a very important sector of the economy whose aim is to increase student and staff mobility, enrich the learning and research experience, and improve knowledge transfer, through active participation in multilateral projects, thematic networks, joint degrees and initiative at regional and international level (Kublashvili 2013, 77).

The changes that have taken place in tourism and education over the past two decades have shown convergence between these two sectors. Therefore, learning beyond the borders of students’ own country can be an opportunity to develop young people’s intellectual assets, but it can also give economic benefits to the economy as a whole.

The Erasmus Plus Program as an Example of an Educational Journey Shaping the Professionals Skills of Polish Youth

The right to education is one of the fundamental human rights that should be realized through equal access, level and the quality of education (Jurgowski 2009, 58–59). International mobility, internationalization of education and training, recognition and certification of professional qualifications, systems of comparison and transfer of best practices should be strengthened to achieve one of the EU’s main objectives of creating a knowledge-based economy (Żółtowski, Michowska 2002, 25). One of the first initiatives aiming to increase mobility and the internationalization of education was the Erasmus program launched in 1987. Table 1 presents the history of educational programs supported financially by European Union Funds.

Table 1: The history of educational programs supported financially by European Union Funds

The first phase of the program (1987–1995)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 15 June 1987 – introduction of the Erasmus program by the European Commission (the European Action Scheme for Mobility of University Studies) – During this period, it supported intercollegiate co-operation involving the exchange of students and teachers, joint development of study programs with other universities and the organization of intensive courses. – 1989 – introduction of European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) pilot program. – The Erasmus program was attended by 12 EU countries, and the budget was about 277 million ecu
Second phase of the program (1995–2000 and 2000–2006)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 1995–1999 – Erasmus program was functioning under the name of „Socrates I” (This initiative supported education at all levels of teaching) – 1998 – Poland’s accession to the Socrates I program – 2000–2006 – Socrates II program – total budget of the program amounted to 1.7 billion Euros
Third phase of the program (2007–2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Between 2007 and 2013, the Lifelong Learning Program was implemented. It consisted of four sectoral programs: Comenius (addressed to institutions involved in education from kindergarten to high school), Erasmus (university-targeted program), Leonardo da Vinci (vocational education and training), Grundtvig (adult education) – There were 33 countries participating in the program: 28 EU countries, 4 EEA countries (Iceland, Norway, Liechtenstein and Switzerland) and the candidate country Turkey. – Total budget of the program amounted to 3 billion Euros
Fourth phase of the program (2014–2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – In 2014 the Erasmus plus program has been introduced. It is the result of the combination of the following European initiatives implemented by the European Commission in 2007–2013: Lifelong Learning Program, Youth in Action Program, Erasmus Mundus, Tempus, Alfa, Edulink and cooperation programs with industrialized countries in the field of higher education. – Its total budget is 14.7 billion Euros – Countries participating in the program include: 28 Member States of the European Union; – EFTA / EEA countries: Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway; – Candidate Countries: Turkey, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

Source: own study based on Gawel, 2017; <http://erasmusplus.org.pl/o-programie/>

As shown in Table 1, vocational education was funded for the first time in the second phase of mobility programs, showing that the European Union aims to internationalize education at all levels of education.

The Erasmus plus program, which initiated the fourth phase of the development of EU-funded education programs, is currently being implemented. It refers to areas such as education, training, youth and sport, which can significantly contribute to meeting the needs created by the socioeconomic changes that Europe will face by the end of the decade. The program supports actions, co-operation and tools that are consistent with the strategy “Europe 2020”, and its flagship initiatives, such as Youth on the Move and Agenda for New Skills and Jobs. It also contributes to the objectives of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training and the EU strategy for youth through open method of coordination. The structure of Erasmus + includes the following elements:

- Action 1. Educational mobility;
- Action 2. Cooperation for innovation and exchange of good practice;
- Action 3. Support in policy reform;
- Jean Monnet program;
- Sport – thanks to the Erasmus + program, for the first time in the history of the European Union, educational programs are supported by sport initiatives.

The fight against rising unemployment, especially among young people, has become one of the priority tasks of European governments. Early termination of education is associated with a higher risk of unemployment and social marginalization. Entrepreneurs who work in line with the EU’s goal of developing a knowledge-based economy should increase their competitiveness using talent and innovation.

Such investments in knowledge, skills and competences will benefit not only individuals, but also institutions, organizations and the whole society, thus contributing to economic growth and ensuring equal access, prosperity and social inclusion in Europe and beyond the borders (European Commission 2017, 5).

2. Analysis of the Impact of the Erasmus Plus Program on the Development of Vocational Education in Poland

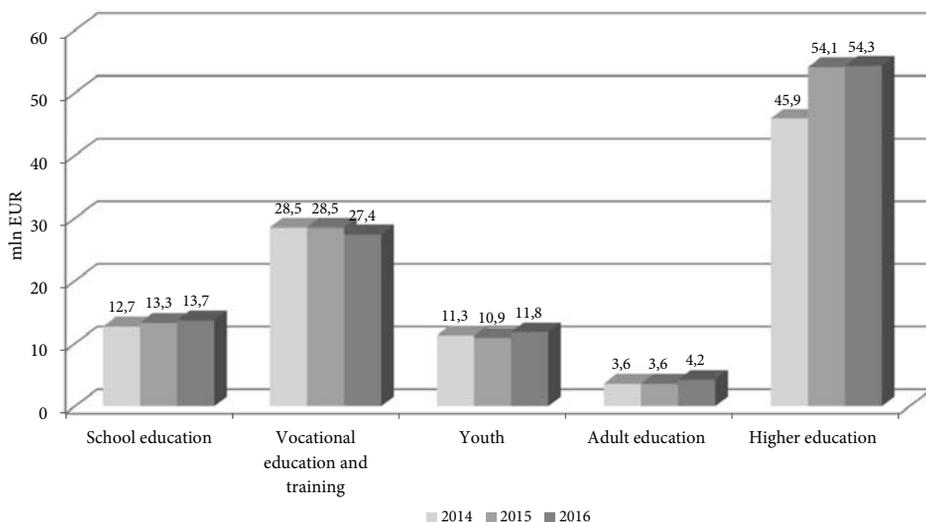
Unemployment among young people and simultaneous lack of skilled labor force are two of the main problems of the contemporary labor market. The renaissance of vocational education is currently noticeable, but the neglected education system has to cope with many demands such as rebuilding its prestige, an increase in the level of teaching, retrofitting schools classrooms, and above all, strengthening cooperation with entrepreneurs. Due to the rapid technological progress, schools are unable to

keep pace with the changes that occur in companies, so it is important to involve employers in the education system, because thanks to them school students have access to the latest technology (Kowalczyk 2015, 20).

The European Union, noticing the need to cooperate between vocational schools and employers, has financed the internship program for vocational school students. The added value from this type of international educational trip is the acquisition of social and personal competences that will give young people the ability to adapt to the changing labor market. Moreover, each trainee, apart from gaining a practical qualification in a given profession, is obliged to participate in a cultural program which allows them to learn about tradition, history and culture of their host country, at the same time strengthening the ties between the inhabitants of the European continent.

The Erasmus plus budget for Poland is growing year by year. In 2014 it amounted to 104 million Euros, in 2015 the total budget for this program equaled 110.4 million euro, whereas in 2016 European Union spent 115.5 million euro on supporting the Polish education system. The highest expenditure was incurred on the development of higher education, whereas vocational education is second in terms of funding for mobility projects, showing that this type of education plays an important role in the socioeconomic development of contemporary Europe (see figure 1).

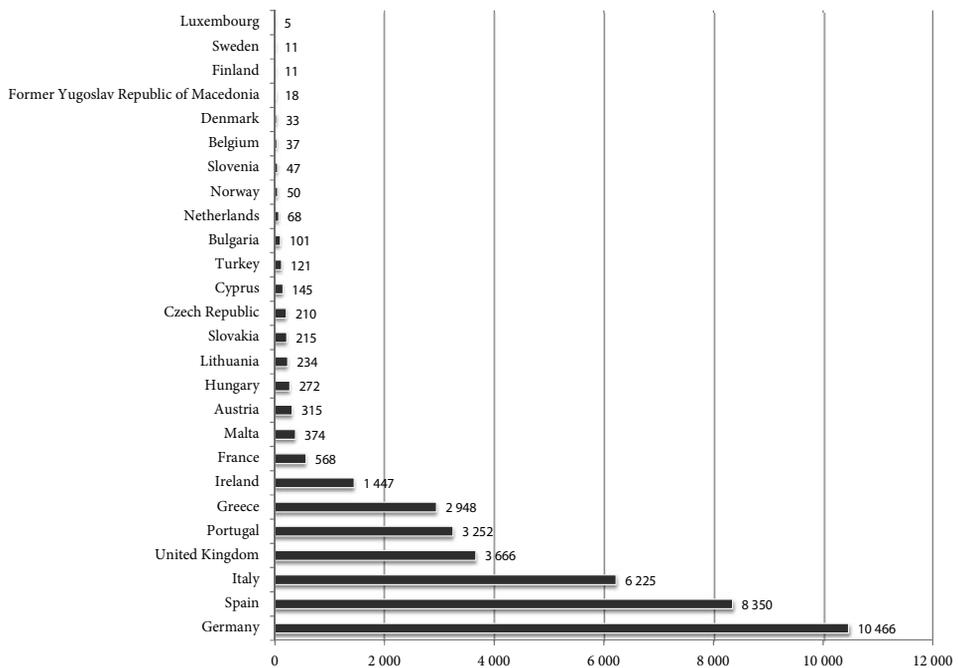
Figure 1: Indirect management funds by sector



Source: own study based on Erasmus plus, Foundation for the Development of the Education System, http://erasmusplus.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/eplus_statystyki_14_16_www.pdf

In the years 2014–2017, 39189 learners went abroad for apprenticeship, while at the same time only 1571 teachers took advantage of the opportunity to improve their qualifications within the Erasmus plus program – Action 1. Such data show that schools place greater emphasis on the development of youth mobility, whereas teachers are seen to contribute less to the internationalization of vocational education, which is a misconception because the improvement of competence and qualifications of vocational teachers contributes to the development of innovation in education.

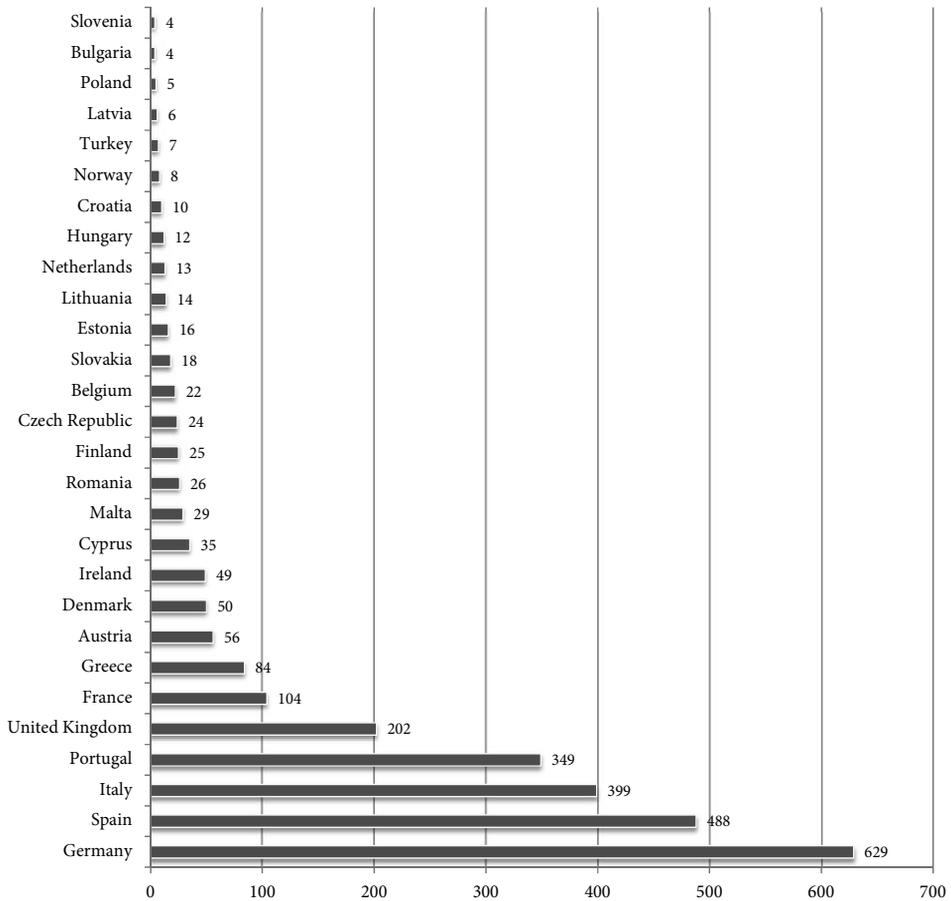
Figure 2: Number of Erasmus plus program participants (learners) in VET sector – action 1 in 2014–2017 by host country



Source: own study based on data received from Foundation for the Development of the Education System.

As can be seen from Figures 2 and 3, both Western and Southern European countries such as Germany, Great Britain, Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece are the most popular destinations for educational travel. In the future, it would be worthwhile to consider studying the determinants of the choice of these countries by the beneficiaries in order to verify the hypothesis that the choice of partner countries depends not only on the high quality of the offered training, but also on the tourist attractiveness and the ratio of prices in the host country to incomes in the origin country.

Figure 3: Number of Erasmus plus program participants (staff) in VET sector – action 1 in 2014–2017 by host country



Source: own study based on data received from Foundation for the Development of the Education System.

Table 2 presents a set of intangible results gained by participants of Erasmus plus projects in the VET sector. This table shows that educational travel not only trains professional skills, but above all provides a range of personal and social competences that will enable young Europeans to operate on a competitive labor market. This type of travel enhances the European identity, teaches tolerance, and allows to overturn stereotypes. Erasmus plus program also gives an opportunity to improve foreign language skills and learn about culture, history and traditions of the host countries.

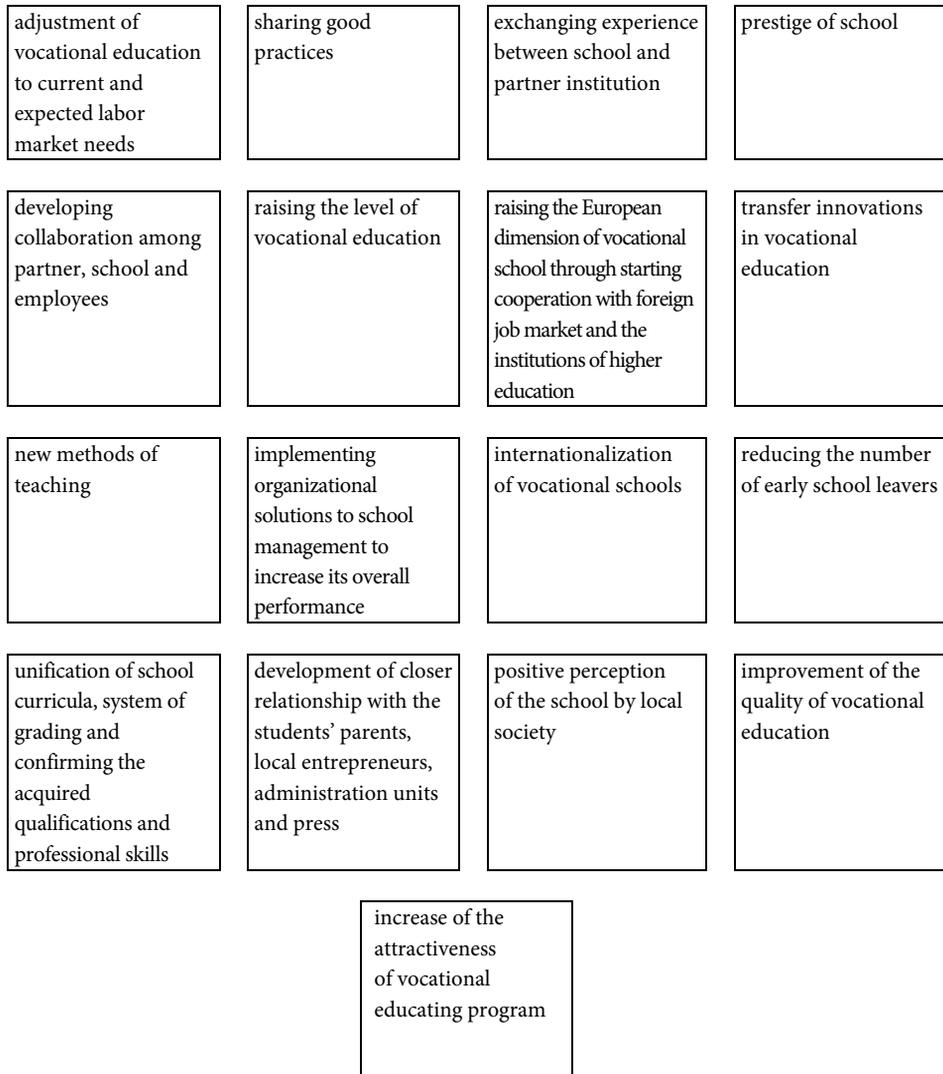
Table 2: Intangible results gained by participants of Erasmus plus projects in the VET sector

Knowledge and professional qualifications	Personal and social competences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learning new information technologies • learning about culture and customs of the host country • getting to know a new market in order to be competitive on European markets • development of linguistic competences • use of theoretical knowledge in practice • increase of the level of the participants' practical knowledge • gaining the clarity of achieved skills (the Europass Mobility certificate) • the acquisition of new competences in accordance with the needs of the changing labor market • familiarization with modern standards, different structures of facilities, the organization of work and required discipline, • getting knowledge about starting own business • familiarization of the participants with innovations in areas such as: quality standards, work regulations, conditions and equipment in a workshop, research facilities, health and safety at work regulations. • ability to create own brand which is recognized in the region and introducing it on national and European markets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • promoting mobility of young Europeans • shaping international openness • ability to overcome social barriers, challenge stereotypes and prejudice • learning how to make own decision, be responsible and reliable • development of the ability connected with group work • increase independence, responsibility and resourcefulness, • increase self-confidence and self-esteem • development of communicative and cooperative skills • increase labor mobility • adaptation to living and working in European countries, support of personal development (openness , tolerance, sensitivity), • the ability to deal with difficult situations

Source: own study based on European Commission, "Erasmus + project results" <http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/projects/>, Foundation for the Development of the Education System, <http://erasmusplus.org.pl/dokumenty/#wyniki>.

The benefits from financial support of the Erasmus plus program contribute not only to the development of the individual, but also have positive impact on the whole vocational education. As shown in Figure 4, schools that have raised funds for educational trips for both their pupils and teaching staff emphasize that such programs contribute to improving the image of vocational education, increasing the quality of teaching, enhancing the attractiveness of lessons, internationalizing the educational establishment, and also ameliorate cooperation with employers not only on the Polish market but also on the European market. These advantages pose an opportunity to rebuild vocational education in Poland and therefore to better adjust the demand to the supply on the labor market.

Figure 4: Benefits of the Erasmus plus program for the development of vocational education in Poland



Source: own study based on European Commission, “Erasmus + project results” <http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/projects/>, Foundation for the Development of the Education System, <http://erasmusplus.org.pl/dokumenty/#wyniki>

Conclusions

The aim of this article was to show the impact of educational travels financed by EU funds on the development of vocational education in Poland, which has been neglected for many years. Currently, thanks to the support of EU funds, the educational offer and the quality of education in vocational schools have improved significantly. Analysis of available documents and reports showed that traveling to other countries for educational purposes is not only an opportunity to improve skills related to the profession, but also an occasion to shape many personal and social competencies such as the ability to overcome social barriers and challenge stereotypes and prejudice, as well as learning how to make own decisions and be responsible and reliable.

The benefits of Erasmus plus can be seen as multifaceted. The program affects not only the individual development of pupils and the improvement of the quality of vocational education, but it also contributes to the development of the region's economy, especially to the tourism and hospitality industry. The changes that have taken place in tourism and education over the last two decades show convergence between these two sectors. Hence the idea of introducing educational mobility programs has brought mutual benefits both to the tourism and education services sector. European regions, where educational tourism is well developed, can become attractive locations for investments, as in the future they will be characterized by low unemployment and high living standards.

The article also presents statistics referring to the most visited countries that offer internships and placements. In the future, it would also be worth exploring the determinants of partner countries' choice to find out what factors influence the preference of destinations for educational tourism.

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