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## **COOPERATION BETWEEN THE STATE PROFESSIONAL SCHOOLS OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT UNITS IN THE CONTEXT OF LOCAL SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

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## **WSPÓŁPRACA PAŃSTWOWYCH WYŻSZYCH SZKÓŁ ZAWODOWYCH Z JEDNOSTKAMI SAMORZĄDU TERYTORIALNEGO W KONTEKŚCIE LOKALNEGO ROZWOJU SPOŁECZNO-GOSPODARCZEGO**

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**Summary:** Universities operate in a complicated environment, in which one of the important elements are, in addition to business, local government authorities. The purpose of the article is to characterize the cooperation of local government units (LGU) with state professional schools of higher education (SPSHE) in order to create local socio-economic development. The object of research are SPSHE from the Lubelskie Voivodeship together with LGU in which they are located. The stage of collecting primary data included surveys among LGU and SPSHE employees, which were carried out as part of broader research for the doctoral dissertation of one of the authors of the article. The survey research method was used. Research shows that such cooperation still faces numerous barriers. There is a need to establish closer cooperation between LGU and SPSHE, primarily in the area of designing local development by local government authorities in the region, as well as increasing the activity of SPSHE and LGU in cluster structures.

**Keywords:** SPSHE, LGU, development, cluster, cooperation.

**Streszczenie:** Uczelnie funkcjonują w skomplikowanym otoczeniu. Jednym z jego istotnych elementów są, oprócz biznesu, organa władzy samorządowej. Celem artykułu jest charakterystyka współpracy jednostek samorządu terytorialnego (JST) z państwowymi wyższymi szkołami zawodowymi (PWSZ) w celu kreowania lokalnego rozwoju społeczno-ekonomicznego. Obiektem badań są PWSZ z województwa lubelskiego wraz z JST, w których są one zlokalizowane. Etap gromadzenia danych pierwotnych objął badania ankietowe wśród pracowników JST oraz PWSZ. Badania te realizowano w ramach szerszych badań na potrzeby pracy doktorskiej jednego z autorów artykułu. Zastosowano metodę badań ankietowych. Wyniki analizy pokazują, że współpraca taka wciąż napotyka liczne bariery. Istnieje potrzeba nawiązania ściślejszej współpracy JST z PWSZ, przede wszystkim w zakresie projektowania rozwoju lokalnego przez organy władzy JST w regionie, konieczne jest także zwiększenie aktywności współuczestnictwa PWSZ i JST w strukturach klastrowych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** PWSZ, JST, rozwój, klaster, współpraca.

## 1. Introduction

The problem of local and regional development is a complex issue and in light of the research presented in the literature on the subject, recognized from the point of view of various theoretical concepts. The complexity of this issue is already evident in the process of explaining the concept, mechanisms and conditions of local development, defining the region and local system, and their mutual socio-economic relations. However, separate consideration of the validity of the local and regional development categories is neither justified nor possible. This is due to the lack of objective criteria for evaluating the processes occurring in these fields, as well as the diversity of their main characteristics and the strength of impact on the environment. The subject of studies and analyses is often the issue of local and regional development in the socio-economic sphere, since these areas overlap to a large extent.

State professional schools of higher education (SPSHE) are increasingly active in the stream of socio-economic changes. Not only do they have to keep up with it, but they should also create it. In the age of a knowledge-based economy, research results and innovations are becoming increasingly important in creating development processes (Berezka, 2011, p. 15; Kalinowski, 2016, p. 54; Melnikas, 2018, p. 7). Many studies have already been prepared, confirming the link between the functioning of SPSHE in a given region and the phenomenon of building a knowledge-based economy as well as increasing the quality of human capital resources. A knowledge-based economy puts the main emphasis on the ability of units (individuals, organizations, institutions) to acquire knowledge. Implemented knowledge, i.e. the so-called practical knowledge or know-how, seems to be particularly important, which is present in the competences used in practice (Marszałek, 2010, p. 53). This kind of knowledge, as well as the related skills and competences are acquired during practical studies conducted at public (state-owned) vocational schools (Adamowicz, 2014, p. 59).

The establishment of public vocational schools was associated with the process of the political transformation in Poland and the building of a new administrative and structural model of the state. They were created in local-regional systems, with full autonomy, especially in cities that lost their voivodeship status (Zimny, 2017, p. 141). State professional schools of higher education (SPSHE), in operation for 20 years, have become an integral segment of the higher education system in Poland and constitute an important element of the complex system of society, the state and the entire international community. The nature of the relationship between the school and the environment is complex and very diverse. This is due to the diversity of these schools and their stakeholders, i.e. internal and external stakeholders<sup>1</sup> (Geryk, 2012, p. 73). The school's stakeholder circle is much wider than in other organizations (Fazlagić, 2012, p. 187). Other authors have indicated the groups that participate in the university's activities and play direct and indirect roles in its management (Salleh and Omar, 2013, p. 655). The precise identification of all existing and possible connections between the school and the environment is beyond the scope of this study. Its purpose is to show the essence and scope of cooperation of the SPSHE with LGU, which can be of great importance for shaping local and regional development. Such cooperation may take various forms and relate to many areas, e.g. culture, sport and recreation, the economy, the very functioning of the school, as well as the design of local development by authorities of the LGU in the region<sup>2</sup>.

The creation and development of technology parks and clusters<sup>3</sup>, towards which local government authorities and schools should strive, is becoming an increasingly interesting phenomenon.

The Lubelskie region and vocational schools in Biała Podlaska, Chełm and Zamość, as well as the poviats in which the studied SPSHE are located, were selected for the study. The work is primarily based on two types of information sources – primary and secondary. Primary sources include surveys using survey questionnaires. In turn, secondary sources include the available literature on the problem of the research. Empirical research was carried out in 2015-2016 as part of a broad program of research conducted for the purposes of the doctoral dissertation by the author of this article.

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<sup>1</sup> The basic groups of stakeholders for the school are students, school employees, graduates, the community of residents, local and regional authorities, the economic environment (local and national), other schools, the government, founding councils, donors, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Other possible areas of cooperation between city and region authorities and schools are: economic entrepreneurship, the school as a conceptual base, research funding (expertise, analyzes, opinions), infrastructure financing, knowledge and technology transfer centers, attracting new talents, and the achievement reward system (Marszałek, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Pursuant to the Act on financial support for investments, a technology park is a set of separate real estate, together with technical infrastructure, created to transfer knowledge and technology between scientific units and entrepreneurs. Clusters, on the other hand, are links between researchers, entrepreneurs and institutions within a given industry, aimed at seeking solutions of relatively similar problems and thus contributing to the increase of innovation in a given area (Act of 20 March 2002...).

## 2. Connections between SPSHE and LGU – the school staff’s perspective

School staff is one of the best informed groups, among all university stakeholders, about the activities that are undertaken by educational entities in cooperation with the LGU and the initiatives that both parties are involved in. Therefore, surveys addressed to school staff are a very important source of knowledge for recognizing and assessing the studied problem.

The purpose of the research with the use of the questionnaire was to obtain the most complete, cross-sectional information about the school in the context of its cooperation with the LGU, which meant the need to direct surveys to various groups of school staff: teaching and administrative and working in different units of the school. Therefore, the selection of the research sample was deliberate. Teaching staff constituted the most numerous group in the research sample (37.8% of all respondents). Administrative staff had a slightly smaller share in the total number of respondents (33.3%) and the dean’s office staff also constituted a significant part of the sample (28.9% of all surveyed persons)<sup>4</sup>.

The respondents were asked to express their views on the relationship between the university and the local environment (Figure 1).



**Fig. 1.** Opinion of respondents on the relationship between the university and the local community

Source: own research based on the combined opinion of respondents surveyed in the SPSHE in the Lubelskie Voivodeship ( $n = 45$ ).

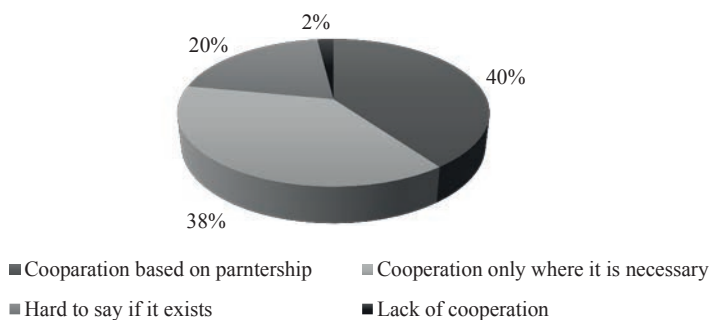
<sup>4</sup> In this group, 45 employees of all three SPSHE of the Lubelskie Voivodeship were included in the survey. A significant majority of respondents (69%) had a master’s degree. Almost one-third of respondents had a doctoral level education. Women constituted 76% of all respondents. Almost half of the respondents (49%) were at the age of 36-45. The second largest age group were respondents aged 26-35. School staff over the age of 46 accounted for 15% of all respondents.

Based on their answers, it can be concluded that the relationship between the school and its surroundings is noticeable, and one-third of respondents said that there is close cooperation between the school and the environment.

Equally often, respondents replied that the relationship with the local environment is not a partnership (especially when it comes to local authorities). Quite often the respondents also chose the answer suggesting that the school's relationship with the LGU is still not clearly defined and is subject to constant transformation. These respondents also suggested that the school is still taking a number of actions to strengthen this relationship with local authorities.

Based on the respondents' answers, a ranking of the most important institutions with which they think the school cooperates was created for each of the surveyed schools. LGUs usually received weights lower than other national schools or local institutions. County ('powiat') offices obtained the highest scores while commune and municipal offices received the lowest ones. This is probably due to the nature of the institution and the strength of connections of a state university on a poviats scale.

The respondents were also asked about the school's cooperation with local authorities. According to their answers, presented in Figure 2, 40% of respondents believe that cooperation between their school and local authorities occurs and is based on partnership relations, while 37.8% believe that this cooperation only takes place when necessary. Only 2.2% of respondents believe that such cooperation does not exist, and 20% were not able to assess this cooperation.

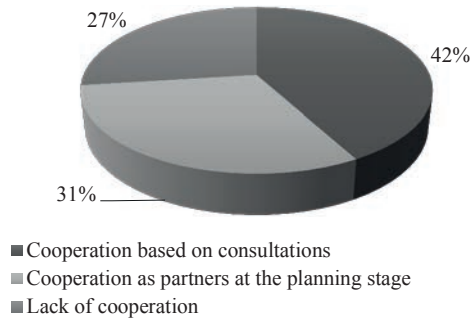


**Fig. 2.** Opinion of the respondents regarding cooperation of the school with local government authorities

Source: own elaboration based on the combined opinion of the respondents interviewed at SPSHE of the Lubelskie Voivodeship ( $n = 45$ ).

The respondents indicated also that the school is invited by local authorities to create local development plans as a consultant. Such replies were given by 42.2% of the survey participants. Fewer respondents, i.e. 31%, indicated that the school's participation in creating local development plans occurs solely at the stage of creating

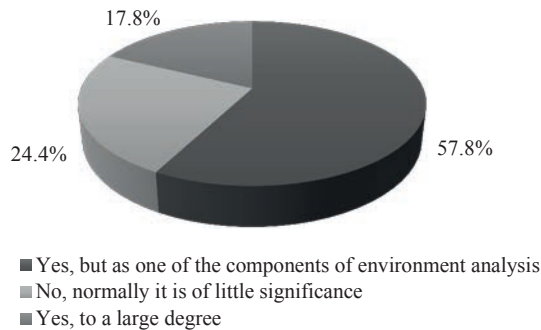
(planning) them, while 26.7% of the respondents noted that the school is not invited by the local authorities to cooperate in such ventures (Figure 3).



**Fig. 3.** Cooperation of the school in creating the local development programme

Source: own elaboration based on the combined opinion of the respondents interviewed at SPSHE of the Lubelskie Voivodeship ( $n = 45$ ).

The cooperation of the school in creating regional development plans is thus rather limited and, ultimately, it seems not to be important to the local authorities as well as to the higher education schools themselves. One ought to bear in mind that the purpose of such plans is to create the future image and conditions in a given region, i.e. to somewhat shape the pro-development conditions in a given geographic area.



**Fig. 4.** Opinion of respondents regarding basing the school's plans on the regional development plans, established by the local authorities.

Source: own elaboration based on the combined opinion of the respondents interviewed at SPSHE of the Lubelskie Voivodeship ( $n = 45$ ).

Figure 4 presents the fact that the school takes into consideration the plans of regional development, conceived by the local authorities, while elaborating its own development plans. It usually treats these plans as one of the elements of environment

analysis, which seems to be justifiable considering the significance of other factors. Almost 25% of the respondents thought that higher education schools do not take into account such plans, since they are of little importance.

The analysis so far reveals that from the perspective of SPSHE employees, cooperation with the LGU is correct, however, not particularly strong. This leads to a conclusion that there is still some room in this area for improvement and the schools themselves ought to take the initiative for the realization of joint ventures, especially of a consultancy or advisory nature. It thus seems that despite proper cooperation during the organization of cultural, sports and educational events by SPSHE jointly with LGU, the academic potential of the school could be used to a much greater extent by the bodies of local authorities in order to shape the social-economic growth of the cities, communes and poviats.

### **3. Relations between SPSHE and LGU – the perspective of LGU employees**

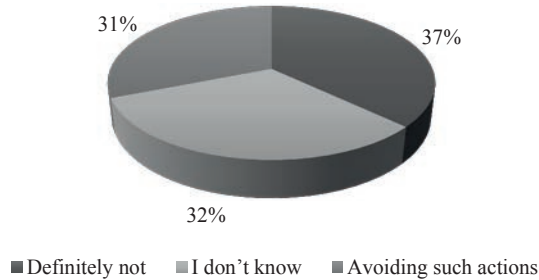
The second, equally significant research group is comprised of the employees of LGU in the area where the researched schools are situated, namely the Lubelskie Voivodeship.

The purpose of the research was to carry out interviews using a survey questionnaire amongst the employees involved in organizing cooperation with the environment, and planning and realizing investments, as well as creating development plans. Therefore, the selection of that particular sample was intentional. In total, 51 surveys were obtained which had been filled out in a correct and complete manner. Employees of the LGU of the Zamojski ‘powiat’ (county) constituted 35.3% (18 persons), whilst the smallest group was formed by employees of LGU from the Chełmski ‘powiat’ – 31.4% (16 persons). The participation of employees from the Bialski ‘powiat’ amounted to 33.3% (17 persons). Bearing in mind the slight differences in the number of participants from individual counties (‘powiat’), one might consider that the structure of 33/33/33 was maintained. A similar structure was obtained in the case of the hierarchy of local authorities (that is: 33.3% of participants employed in the county authorities (‘Starosta’) office; 35.3% in the commune and 31.4% in the structures of municipal authorities)<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Women constituted the majority of the respondents i.e. 73% of the total number of respondents. The group of tested employees of the LGU was diversified in terms of age. The largest number of participants (43.1%) were aged between 26 and 35, while another group in terms of number of participants constituted employees aged between 36 and 45. Employees aged over 46 constituted 19.6% of all survey participants, while those aged 25 constituted only 3.9%. The majority of the survey participants (39.2%) declared work seniority in state administration between 2 and 5 years. A slightly smaller group (33.3%) comprised respondents with seniority of work between 6 and 10 years, and only 7.8% had a seniority level in state administration of more than 11 years. Almost all the respondents had higher education, more than half (54.9%) MA degree, while 43.1% BA degree. Employees with

The respondents were asked if they knew anything about LGU regarding its impact on the functions or local plans for higher education schools (Figure 5).



**Fig. 5.** Impact of LGU on current activities or the policy of functioning of local higher education schools

Source: own elaboration based on the combined opinion of the respondents interviewed at SPSHE of the Lubelskie Voivodeship ( $n = 51$ ).

Almost one-third of the survey participants noted that they knew nothing about such actions, while 31.4% considered such actions as being most likely undertaken. Yet 37.3% noted that such actions were most likely not undertaken, which is shown in Figure 5. This suggests that local governments keep ignoring the schools and make no effort whatsoever to influence their functioning.

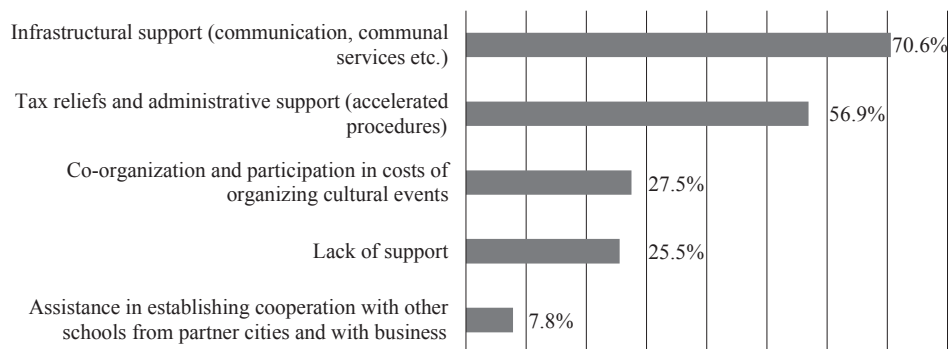
The second issue concerned the actions of LGUs targeted at supporting the functioning of higher education schools located in their respective areas. The respondents most frequently indicated that the support occurred in the form of communicational and infrastructural solutions (i.e. access roads, bus lanes etc.). The second most frequent reply concerned the support provided by state administration, consisting of assigning local tax reliefs or accelerating some administrative procedures. A similar number of respondents indicated that LGUs granted no support to schools within their area, which they defined as cooperation and participation in the costs of cultural events organized by the school, as shown in Figure 6.

The survey also contained a question concerning the participation of school representatives in the process of creating local development plans. Basically the respondents indicated that either they were not able to state whether the representatives of higher education schools were included in the active creation of the plans or noted that they were not (52.9%), since it was not necessary, as shown in Figure 7.

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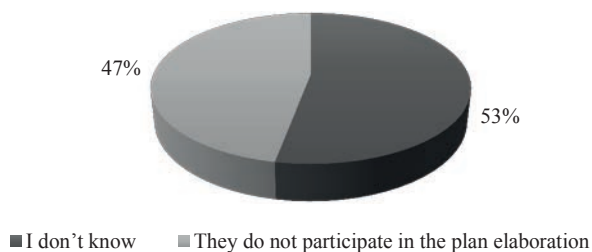
secondary school education constituted only 2% of all the respondents. The survey was completed by mostly by persons holding department employee positions (63.5%). The second, largest group was formed by independent employees, while department managers constituted only 7.9% of the entire tested population.





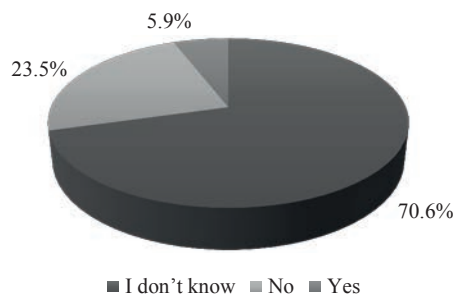
**Fig. 6.** Methods of supporting higher school activities by LGUs

Source: own elaboration based on the combined opinion of the respondents interviewed at SPSHE of the Lubelskie Voivodeship ( $n = 51$ ).



**Fig. 7.** Active participation of representatives of the school in creating local development plans

Source: own elaboration based on the combined opinion of the respondents interviewed at SPSHE of the Lubelskie Voivodeship ( $n = 51$ ).



**Fig. 8.** Considering schools by LGUs upon elaborating local development plans

Source: own elaboration based on the combined opinion of the respondents interviewed at SPSHE of the Lubelskie Voivodeship ( $n = 51$ ).

The structure of the replies to other questions, in which the respondents assessed whether higher education schools are being considered in creating local development plans, thus came as no surprise. The vast majority of respondents – 70.6% indicated that they knew nothing in this regard, while only 5.9% suggested that the LGU considered higher education schools while elaborating local development plans (Figure 8).

The conducted research revealed that neither LGUs nor schools engage in mutual cooperation. There are no strong and durable relations between regional schools and local authorities and, more importantly, both sides do not seem to perceive the need for such a relation to be in place.

#### 4. Conclusions

The sustainable and durable social-economic development of communes, cities and regions is determined by the cooperation of various entities functioning within their local and regional environments. One of the factors conditioning the creation of a stable foundation for development is the skilful cooperation between higher education schools and units of local government. The need for such cooperation is underlined by many various authors (such as: Flejterski, 2011; Hodgson and Spours, 2019; Minkiewicz, 2003; Witt, 2011). The actual practice in this regard is not however satisfactory in the studied region.

The joint initiatives of LGUs and SPSHE may create and support actions of innovative nature, through which they cause improvement in the image of these cities, communes and regions. Local authorities may expect from public higher vocational education schools to be educating personnel with high qualifications and competencies in order to supply local labour markets, as well as realize consultancy and expert tasks, especially in preparing development strategies for the given territorial areas.

The empirical research revealed that in the case of SPSHE and LGU of the Lubelskie Voivodeship one is dealing to a large extent with the lack of skilful cooperation which does not fully use the potential of both partners. As a result of the analysis and synthesis, one can note that both parties ought to establish a much closer cooperation of LGU in the scope of the functioning of the schools, designing local development as well as participating in the cluster structures.

Asian research also presents similar conclusions, but concerning cooperation between universities and enterprises. The study shows that school-enterprise cooperation is currently characterized by low-quality, shallow cooperation, with limited communication between enterprises and vocational schools, and insufficient facilitating involvement by the government and industry organizations (Haisheng, Shibin, and Deyi, 2016, p. 165).

In order for such cooperation to bring satisfactory effects and measurable benefits for the local social-economic development, it must take on the form of long-

lasting and permanent relations, as also noted by other researchers (Terentyeva et al., 2018). One-off initiatives which were realized with the co-participation of SPSHE and LGU did not constitute any significant pro-development factor. The framework of proper cooperation between public vocational schools and LGUs may be ensured by adequate packages of legal, organizational or financial solutions which ought to be created as quickly as possible.

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