Student employment and self-employment

Among graduates of first-cycle (3-year bachelor-level) programmes who finished their studies in 2018, 40% had experience of pre-graduation employment (or self-employment). Almost half of this group had employment preceding the commencement of studies. The share of graduates with such experience is even higher among second-cycle (2-year master-level) programme graduates. 60% of them were employed before graduation, and 40% had episodes of work before the beginning of their last studies. There is one more type of studies, five-year master-level studies reserved only for selected disciplines, such as Medical Science, Law, and Psychology. Graduates of these programmes make up 13% of all graduates and are least likely to have pre-graduation work experience.

Previous research documented differences between fields of study in post-graduation labour market performance. The new ELA data provide evidence that the divergence in professional paths occurs at a much earlier stage. In the case of both first- and second-cycle studies, graduates of social sciences and health sciences are most likely to have experience of pre-graduation employment. Science graduates occupy the other end of the spectrum (see the x-axis in Figure 1).

Graduates of five-year programmes are generally less likely to have pre-graduation work experience than their second-cycle peers. The difference is starkest in the case of medical science. While second-cycle students in this field are most likely to work before graduation (74%), those enrolled in five-year programmes are least likely to do so (7%).

Impact on post-graduation outcomes

Figure 1 also presents the difference in earnings between graduates with and without experience, expressed as the percentage of the average earnings of graduates without experience (y-axis). Unsurprisingly, graduates who have pre-graduation work experience have higher incomes in the first year after graduation. The difference varies widely between fields. In extreme cases, graduates with experience earn 80% more than those without it. In the case of larger disciplines, it rarely exceeds 50%.

Importantly, the share of graduates having work experience does not seem to be related to the increase in average earnings. There is no link between the percentage of graduates with work experience and how well, on average, the graduates of a discipline perform on the labour market.

Conclusion: Next steps

The results show that regardless of the academic discipline, Polish graduates with work experience enjoy a significant labour market advantage in the first year after graduation. The effects of pre-graduation work experience will probably wane with time. However, further research is needed to estimate the size of the effect and to ascertain for how long it lasts.

References and notes

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[4] Detailed information on data sources, linkage, and methodology can be found on the project's website: https://ela.nauka.gov.pl/en/experts/source-data

[5] Pre 2014 POL-on records are deemed likely to be incomplete. There is a higher risk that some groups of graduates were not properly reported by universities. This means that the older the graduate cohort, the shorter on average the observation window during which employment or self-employment is captured.

Reading list

Research on student employment focuses on the incidence, determinants and motivation of combining study and work, and its educational and labour market outcomes. There are several research questions related to the determinants and motivation of student employment, including what type of students from which socio-economic backgrounds are likely to combine study and work, and whether the main motivations of student employment are financial or the accumulation of work experience. Studies of the educational outcomes of student employment explore its effects on the quality of education, academic achievement and dropout rates. Studies of labour market outcomes of combining of study and work are focused on graduate employability, salaries and returns to education and consider the phenomenon of student employment using the approaches of human capital and job market signaling theories.

We have prepared a list of selective academic publications which explore the problem of student employment and might be of particular interest to our readers.

Determinants and patterns of student employment

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Student employment and educational outcomes

- Baert, S., Marx, I., Neyt, B., Van Belle, E., & Van Casteren, J. (2018). Student employment and academic performance: an empirical exploration of the primary orientation theory. Applied Economics Letters, 25(8), 547-552.
- Hovdhaugen, E. 2015. "Working while Studying: The Impact of Term-time Employment on Dropout Rates". Journal of Education and Work, 28(6), 631–651
- Kalenkoski, C. M., and S. W. Pabilonia. 2010. "Parental Transfers, Student Achievement, and the Labor Supply of College Students". Journal of Population Economics, 23(2), 469–496.
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- Van Belle, E., Caers, R., Cuypers, L., De Couck, M., Neyt, B., Van Borm, H., & Baert, S. (2020). What do student jobs on graduate CVs signal to employers? Economics of Education Review, 75, 101979.