

Mariola Tracz

Institute of Geography
Faculty of Geography and Biology
Pedagogical University of Cracow
mtracz@ap.krakow.pl

**INTEREST IN GEOGRAPHY AND ITS STUDIES AMONG
STUDENTS OF POST – SECONDARY SCHOOLS**

Abstract: The paper presents the results of a pilot study on post-secondary school students' interest in geography itself and geography university studies as well as an approach to geography as a scientific discipline. The continuous drop in post-secondary students' population poses a problem to universities, including the field of geography, therefore the research findings may be the support for taking steps intended to counteract the decline in geography studies popularity.

Key words: geography, interest in geography, geography studies

INTRODUCTION

Since early 1990s, significant changes in educational policy have been observed. The graduates from post–secondary schools have rapidly become more and more interested in continuing their education, especially in universities. At the same time, geography as a school subject has been losing its importance in various schools' teaching plans, which has been established in this paper (Groenwald and others 2008). Both, the analyses of educational aims (Zajac 1991) and the assessment of the value of geography as a secondary school subject (Tracz 2008, 2009), have shown that the subject has lost its educational significance in the Polish school over the last two decades of the 20th century. Therefore, a question arises about the social reception of geography as a scientific discipline, teaching subject and a field of study. Observations to date, as well as the exchange of opinions with geographers and geography teachers, show that since the late 1990s, when some increase was discerned, geographical studies'

popularity has been consistently decreasing (Czyż 2002; Król 2007). This conclusion prompted the author to carry out a pilot study on the interest in geography and geographical studies among the post-secondary school students.

THE RANGE AND METHOD OF STUDY

The questionnaire survey was conducted in spring 2010 in randomly chosen grammar schools and technical colleges in the following regions: Małopolskie, Pomorskie, Silesian, Świętokrzyskie and Zachodniopomorskie, which house university centers offering geography as a course of studies. Due to the selection of post-secondary schools and the area of the study, the findings may be considered as material comparative for other regions. Systematic continuation of the study on representative sample in all regions, on the other hand, will lead to important conclusions, which may be useful in making decisions about strategies for the popularization of geographical studies among post-secondary school students and the opportunities of their professional development after completing the course.

The questionnaire survey covered a group of second- and third-grade students of grammar schools as well as third- and fourth-grade students of technical colleges—together 674 students including 405 girls and 269 boys. The students of grammar schools amounted to 87.3% of the questioned population, with 12.7% of technical college students. Out of those polled, the students of second grade constituted 21.6%, third-grade students – 74.9% and the fourth-grade ones – 3.5% (only in technical colleges). The questioned students mainly attended schools situated in towns and cities with over 100 thousand citizens – 60% of the respondents, while smaller towns were represented by 40% (fig. 1). The analysis of the students' participation according to regions showed the following results: Małopolskie – 60.1%, Silesian – 20.2%, Świętokrzyskie – 9.4% and Zachodniopomorskie – 10.4%.

The questionnaire consisted of 20 questions, both multiple-choice (14) and open-ended (6). From a formal point of view, the questionnaire was divided into several parts. The first part considered the facts directly concerning the respondent (sex, type of school, grade, the profile of education). Then the students were asked about their interest in geography as a school subject, its significance at school, and about their potential selection of geography for the Matura examination (the equivalent of A-level exams, taken at the age of 19 in grammar schools or 20 in technical colleges). The following questions covered the plans of further education, the choice of university subject and the motivation for the choice. The final part of the questionnaire included questions regarding the approach to geographer's job, prospects of employment after

Students according to the town's size

more than 100 thous. citizens
 50-100 thous.
 20-50 thous.
 less than 20 thous.

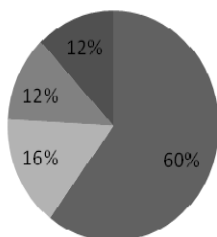


Fig. 1. Students by the town's size

geographical studies, the subject of research attention of geography as a branch of academic study, and the usefulness of geographical knowledge.

FINDINGS

According to the respondents, geography is an interesting subject at this stage of teaching, which was pointed out by 88.3% of the respondents. The index of liking for geography was higher in small (92%) and medium-sized towns (90%). Nakło (2004) obtained similar findings to the research carried out in 2002 using a group of 336 grammar school students from Małopolskie voivodeship (90% of the students declared their interest in the subject). The results are quite surprising comparing them to the study done on the secondary, junior school level (gymnasium) by Mularczyk and Kowalska (2003), which showed that it was the subject of little interest. Therefore, a need exists for carrying out detailed research in order to determine important factors for the assessment of geography with respect to arousing students' interest in the world and its diversity on different stages of education, and to account for potential local distinctions. The analysis of participation in geography competition, treated as one of the indicators of interest in geography declared by the students, showed that 49.9% of them entered the school stage of the competition while 10.4% got through to the final (provincial) stage. Among the students who took part in the competition, the largest number represented Silesian – 67.2% and Małopolskie voivodeship – 60.2%. Likewise, the most students who reached the provincial stage came from the two regions. At post-secondary schools, 24.2% of students took part in the first stage of the geography contest, 16.9% in the

second (district) stage, but nobody was qualified to the final (central) stage. The results have shown that the geography competition in gymnasium is popular with students, which may be due in part to the additional points given to students during the post-secondary schools enrolment for the participation in competitions. The geography contest at post-secondary schools, on the other hand, attracts mainly so called “hobbyists”.

According to $\frac{1}{3}$ of the respondents, geography is an important school subject, at the same time 26.3% of grammar school students have such a favourable attitude, while in technical colleges – only 7.4%. $\frac{1}{4}$ of the students had no explicit opinion on the matter (in grammar schools – 24.3% and in technical colleges – as many as 59.2%). The students of schools in Małopolskie and Zachodniopomorskie regions more frequently underlined the significance of geography as the school subject at their schools than the students from Silesian voivodeship, where 13.8% pointed out minor importance of geography (table 1). This rank of geography as a subject of teaching coincides in part with the research conducted by Zielińska and Zieliński (2007) among gymnasium students, where, in addition, an increase in educational significance of geography was observed in relation to other subjects throughout the years of gymnasium education.

Table 1. The significance of geography as a subject of teaching

Voivodeship	important	quite important	hard to say	of little importance
Małopolskie	40.8%	24.3%	26.6%	8.3%
Silesian	24.0%	27.6%	34.6%	13.8%
Świętokrzyskie	27.1%	43.0%	26.6%	3.3%
Zachodniopomorskie	37.0%	44.0%	18.5%	0.5%

The analysis of preferences for the subject of studies showed that the most popular subjects were economy – 20% of the respondents chose it, tourism and recreation – 13.0%, law – 10.5%, geodesy and cartography – 10.5%, while 4% of the students declared the willingness to study geography (fig. 2). It should be underlined that 10% of the respondents did not have a specific field of study (among second-graders 18%), and only 5% asserted that they would not undertake further studies. In the sample population, 65% declared the selection of geography as an additional subject for the Matura exam. Therefore, despite choosing geography for Matura, most of the students are not interested in studying this field in university. Geography Matura exam is, however, often enumerated in the enrolment requirements for other fields of study (e.g. tourism,

environmental protection etc.). The main reason for the selection of the subject of studies is, according to the students' assertion, their interest in the subject. The next most frequent incentive was low enrolment requirements (a fair chance of entering the studies), and then the salary amount, suggestions from others (parents, colleagues), job satisfaction and a chance of finding a job.

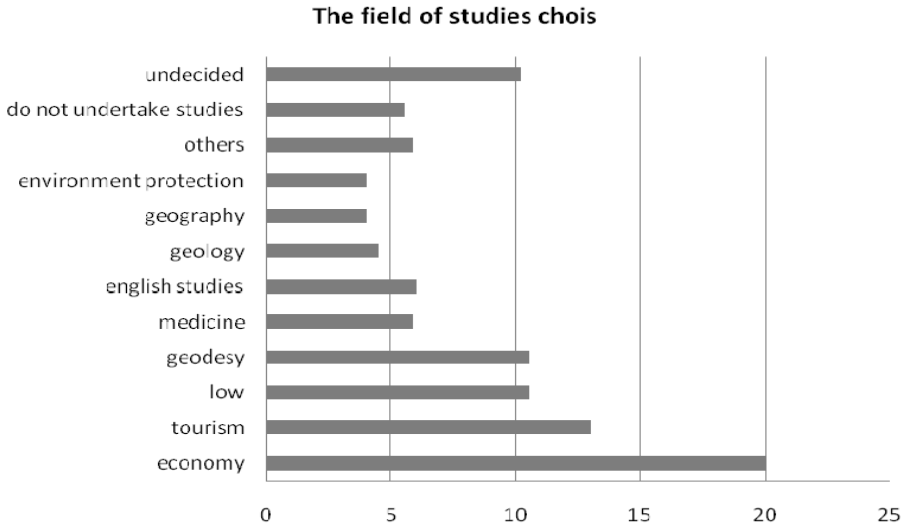


Fig. 2. The field of studies' choice

Very interesting answers were given to the questions concerning opportunities for employment after geography studies. Most of the students mentioned the profession of teacher (64.5%), but also tourist industry (20%), civil service (e.g. the Municipal Council) – 10.2%, meteorologist (10.2%), environment protection (7.2%), tourist guide (5.2%), university or college (1.8%). The students of schools in towns and cities with the population over 100 thousand mentioned more opportunities of employment for the geographer (4–6) than the students from smaller towns (1–3). The students' knowledge of the employment market is quite up-to-date, as questioned about abilities which increase the chances of finding a job, the students mentioned: command of foreign languages, professional experience, creativity, the use of information technologies, driving license and organizational abilities. In the students' opinion, the jobs of lawyer, journalist, civil servant and teacher are accorded high prestige, and the profession of geographer was put at the same level as biologist – 2.5 points out of 5 (fig. 3).

Financial prestige, on the other hand, is, according to the students, given to the jobs of geodesist and journalist while the job of geographer enjoys low financial prestige (fig. 4).

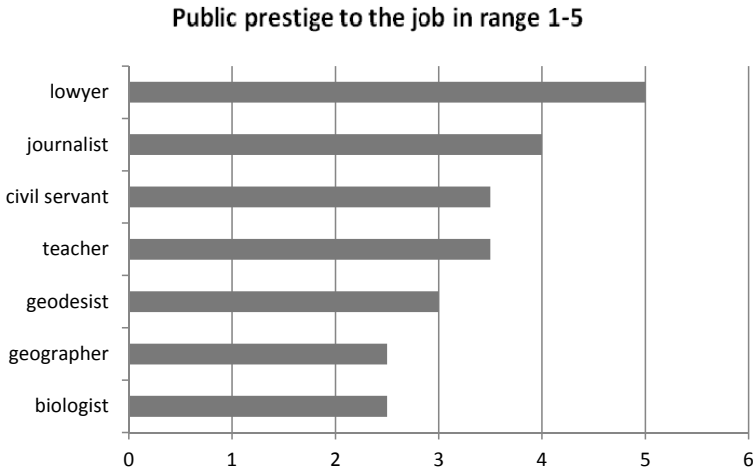


Fig. 3. Public prestige of the job in range 1–5

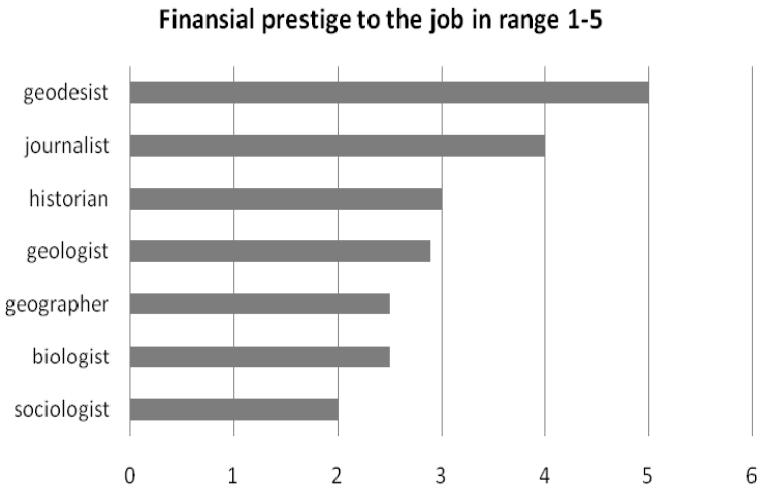


Fig. 4. Financial prestige of the job in range 1–5

The final set of questions concerned the approach to geography as a scientific discipline and making good use of its achievements in economy. Majority of the respondents think that the subject of geography is to collect information about different Earth's features (66.6%), provide the knowledge about various countries (64.3%) or find relations between the human being and the environment (33.9%). To the lesser degree, on the other hand, it studies and forecasts changes in the relations between the environment and the human being, and

makes scientific discoveries used in the economy (table 2). In one of the questions, the respondents were asked whether it is possible to learn from mass media (television, the press) about the subject of geography and its scientific achievements and as much as 85% of the students replied that such information appeared very seldom. It is hardly surprising since all the geographers, who appear in programmes, are usually introduced as trade experts. Taking into account the opportunities of using geographical knowledge in the economy, the students most frequently mentioned the environment protection (60%), and then transport (20%), industry (8%), agriculture (4%), civil service (3.5%), planning (3.5%), meteorology and hydrology (3.5%), emergency management and logistics (2%).

Table 2. The subject of geography as a science

Specification	very often	often	sometimes	rarely
Gaining knowledge about the relations human being -the environment	33.9	46.6%	19.5%	0.0%
Studying and gaining knowledge about the nature and the society	11.9 %	45.2%	40.6%	2.3%
Providing knowledge about various countries and continents	64.3%	28.5%	7.0%	0.2%
Studying the effects of people’s impact on the environment	37.%	47. 0%	9.5%	5.2%
Gathering and analyzing information about different Earth features	66.6%	21.4%	7.1%	5.0%
Studying and prognosticating the changes in the relations the environment – human begins	11.4%	48.5%	37.1%	3.0%
Conducting scientific discoveries and making use of them in the economy	2.3%	30.0%	54.7%	13.0%

The pilot study allowed the assessment of post-secondary school student’s interest in geography and geography studies including their determinants. The obtained information forms the basis for further research and deliberations on how to increase the efficiency of the didactic process of informing the society about geographical facts together with wider use of mass media and intensifying measures to arouse students’ interest in geography studies and their further professional development. Apart from that, due to the introduction of maths as an obligatory subject in Matura examination, the exam results may affect the decisions concerning the terms of geography studies’ matriculation.

References

- Czyż T., 2002, Rozwój kadry naukowo-dydaktycznej geografów i powiązania ośrodków akademickich w procesie jej kształcenia w Polsce w latach 1990–2000 [The development of the research-didactics staff of geographers and links among academic centers in the process of their education], *Przegląd Geograficzny*, 74, 1, pp. 3–27.
- Groenwald M., Plit E., Rodzoś J., Szkuła E., Tracz M., 2008, Raport o stanie geografii szkolnej w nowym systemie oświaty w Polsce [The report on geography condition in new education system in Poland], *Dokumentacja Geograficzna*, 38, pp.5–17.
- Król A., 2007, *Motywy wyboru studiów geograficznych przez studentów Akademii Świętokrzyskiej* [The motives for taking up the geography studies at the Holycross Academia in Kielce], [in]: Strzyż M., Zieliński A. (ed.), *Region w edukacji przyrodniczo-geograficznej* [Region in the Education in Geography and Nature Science], Nauki geograficzne w badaniach regionalnych, 4, pp. 59–63.
- Nagło E., 2004, *Podstawowe czynniki wpływające na stosunek uczniów do geografii jako przedmiotu nauczania* [The main elements influencing of students' attitude toward geography as a school subject], [in]: Osuch W., Piróg D. (ed.), *Kształcenie i doszkadzanie nauczycieli geografii w Polsce i w krajach Unii Europejskiej w drodze do jednoczącej się Europy* [Teaching and training geography teachers in Poland and UE countries on a road to the uniting Europe], Wyd. Nauk. AP Kraków, pp. 97–99.
- Mularczyk M., Kowalska A., 2003, Postawy gimnazjalistów wobec geografii [The grammar-school students attitude towards geography], *Geografia w Szkole*, 5, pp. 272–276.
- Zielińska A., Zieliński A., 2007, *Edukacyjne znaczenie przedmiotu geografia w ocenie uczniów 23 Gimnazjum w Kielcach* [Educational importance of geography in students' opinion from 23 Gimnazjum in Kielce], [in]: Wójtowicz B. (ed.), *Kształcenie geograficzne we współczesnym świecie. Różnorodność koncepcji kształcenia geograficznego* [Training geographers in the contemporary world. The variety of conceptions of geographical education], Akademia Świętokrzyska, Kielce, pp.81–88.
- Tracz M., 2008, *Edukacja geograficzna w okresie transformacji* [Geographical education during the transformation period], [in]: Borowiec M., Rachwał T., Lach J., (ed.), *Problemy transformacji społeczno-ekonomicznych i przyrodniczych struktur przestrzennych* [The problems of socio-economic transformation and natural spatial structures], Wyd. Nauk AP Kraków, pp. 611–616.
- Tracz M., 2008, Znaczenie geografii jako przedmiotu ogólnokształcącego na przełomie XX i XXI wieku- studium przypadku [The importance of geography as a secondary school subject at the turn of the 20th and 21st century – a case study], *Dokumentacja Geograficzna*, 38, pp. 72–78.
- Zając S., 1991, *Cele nauczania geografii* [The aims of geography teaching], Wyd. Naukowe WSP Kraków.