Adolescents are the future of the European Union. They are the ones who will make strategic decisions and shape relations among the member countries. In order to manage political and economic challenges and to create Europe of knowledge, the significance of education and promotion of the European identity among young people has to be emphasized. The research problem being solved in the article is: do the educational programmes created by the European Union develop and shape the European identity among young people? Why do the students who participated in exchanges treat themselves as the Europeans? How can the development of the European identity be helpful for any current or future EU strategy to succeed?

The purpose of this research was to become acquainted with the opinions of the younger generation on the EU member countries, foreigners living there and the European economy during/after crisis. The tasks of this article are to obtain valuable, for the further integration of the European Union, information from the Polish students who spent at least 3 months abroad; to present the views of Polish students on the evolution of their European identity; to highlight the advantages and shortcomings of student exchanges and to state and recommend what the students would like to alter and enhance in Polish schools after returning from abroad.

The object of this article is the European identity and its development among Polish students who took part in student exchange programmes created by the European Union. The research methods used in the study were a survey and a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the results. A survey was conducted in May 2011 among 100 of Polish students who took part in European student exchange programmes (e.g. Erasmus or Leonardo da Vinci). The study included 13 detailed questions, both open and closed. It helped in pinpointing the pros and cons of the system. What is more, it highlighted the advantages of seeking challenges abroad and temporary change of environment. It may also be useful in eliminating the possible drawbacks mentioned by respondents.

The results of this research are particularly significant for economists because they forecast possible migrations in the nearest future due to distinct and fast development of the European identity. The vast majority of the young people feel responsible not only for their country of birth but also for the whole Union as well. They tend to name themselves Europeans as often as Poles. They are not guided by stereotypes and treat foreigners as individuals without generalizing. The young generation is not afraid to work abroad and/or with foreigners, and even looks forward to it. People become better educated, aware of who they want to be, more creative and innovative. Because of constantly improving level of languages, development of the European Research Area, transfer of knowledge and open access to information, it happens that particular institutions, enterprises or smaller companies exchange among one another products, services and employees. The results lead to certain conclusions. Despite the fact that the European educational policy was so heavily criticized, it appears that it has at least one reason to be valued for – the development of European identity among young people. The economic growth may be based on culture. The success of the European Union and its strategies depends on well-informed citizens who understand, support, identify and feel responsible for all actions undertaken by UE. That is why, there is a need for new models of communication and cooperation between EU institutions, the economy and European citizens. The globalization leads to constant integration of the European countries, societies and economies. Because of the Internet the distance is no longer a problem, that is why people may easily maintain relations with foreigners after returning to their country. It makes them pay more attention to their behavior and tendencies. In other words, it makes them more responsible European citizens.

Keywords: European identity, Erasmus, Integration, European Research Area (ERA), European citizens.

Introduction

In the 90s, there was a conviction that the single currency will certainly have a significant impact on people’s identification with the European Union. Still, a need to bring the European citizens together on non-economic grounds was observed (O’Rourke, 1996). Nowadays, it is obvious that the Euro currency was asked to be much more than a currency can possibly be. However, other actions undertaken by the European Union caused and supported the development of European identity. Young people, called generation Y, began to think of themselves as the Europeans. It happened due to the educational programmes promoted by the Union.

The research problem being solved in the article is: do the educational programmes created by the European Union develop and shape the European identity among young people? Why do the students who participated in exchanges treat themselves as the Europeans? How can the development
of the European identity be helpful for any current or future EU strategy to succeed?

The aim of the following study is to make oneself familiar with the views of young Poles on the student exchanges and their impact on shaping the European identity. One may notice that the young generation in Poland treat themselves not only as Poles but also as Europeans.

The purpose of this research is to indicate that the success of any on-going or future strategies depends on informing Europe’s citizens and making them identify with the objectives stated by the European Union.

Despite the fact that European identity is a term used often in the past, there is still little knowledge of how to spread it and make people believe in it. The novelty of the following study shows that owing to well-informed citizens who are intent on the European Union, understand the aims of its strategies and actions and identify with it, Europe may develop more rapidly in the future. The Europeans are desperately needed for any strategy to succeed. The goals of the Europe2020 strategy are only attainable if European citizens start to feel responsible for its success.

The tasks of this article are as follows:
• to obtain valuable, for the further integration of the European Union, information from the Polish students who spent at least 3 months abroad;
• to present the views of Polish students on the evolution of their European identity;
• to highlight the advantages and shortcomings of student exchanges;
• to state and recommend what the students would like to alter and enhance in Polish schools after returning from abroad.

The object of this article is the European identity and its development among Polish students who took part in student exchange programmes created by the European Union.

As the research method a survey was carried out in different regions of Poland, various higher schools and among day-time and part-time students who studied at that time a wide range of majors.

The survey was conducted in 2011 and contained 13 detailed questions, both open and closed. What is more, it was analyzed both in a quantitative and qualitative way. Owing to those, the author was enabled to analyze the answers given by respondents as promptly as possible.

Among many others, the students were asked to comment on the development of European identity and their potential place of residence in the future. In order to gather this sort of data, 100 of students were given surveys.

The results of the article: it was revealed that students, who were enabled to participate in student exchanges organized by the EU, slowly but firmly develop European identity. They consider working and staying abroad in the future and are not prejudiced against other European nations.

Towards Europe of Knowledge

“Knowledge society” was the best-known slogan of the Lisbon Strategy launched in 2000. It was certainly one of the most far-reaching and complex political initiatives embarked upon at that time. Its goal consisted of a long-term agenda of modernisation and innovation in order to make the European Union “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world [developing faster than the United States] capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion1” within just one decade.

The multidimensional approach of the Lisbon Strategy made it the original phenomenon and certainly one of the most peculiar economic integration processes in the world. Still, in 2005 it was already clear that the ambitious assumptions of the Lisbon Strategy will not be met. Indeed, the majority of the objectives (concerning, for instance, employment) were never attained. As a result, a new strategy called the Europe 2020 had to be adopted in 2010 as a ‘successor’ to the Lisbon Strategy.

Despite the fact that the Lisbon Strategy was so heavily criticized by researchers in Europe, the study presented below proves that there is a group of people really pleased with the outcome of the Lisbon Strategy. These people strongly believe that it offered them opportunities impossible to reach otherwise, and therefore, they consider it successful and look forward to its continuation in a form of the Europe 2020 Strategy. European Union’s actions undertaken in the field of education and training met with the approval of the young generation. Polish students value the improvement of the quality of learning systems and greater opportunities for people of all ages. They seem to be contented with the three mutually reinforcing priorities which the new strategy puts forward. The Europe 2020 focuses on smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, on the development of a knowledge and innovation-based economy, promotion of a more competitive economy, as well as social and territorial cohesion.2

For any strategy to be effective the European Union needs well-disposed people. Citizens who will perceive and understand the assumptions, objectives and circumstances which lead the authorities to undertake certain actions.

Europe has its culture, civilization, and a complex history but to become the ideal social structure it needs to reform its identity. The chance to do it, is only possible in relation to the young generation. People born in the 1980s and 1990s were:
• growing up in the time of peace;
• monitoring the process of EU development;
• being taught about its institutions, assumption and objectives at schools;
• taking part in events prepared for them by the EU;
• and the most importantly, they do not remember wars which once divided Europe and still agitate older people; they know it only from stories, books and television.

Such people are often referred to as Facebook, Millennial or Y Generation because they cannot imagine times in which there was no Internet connection and little information accessibility. As a result, they are more open-minded, they do not bear a grudge, do not believe in stereotypes, are keen on learning foreign languages and meeting various kinds of people, representing different nationalities, cultures

and values. They constitute the ideal (and maybe the first) generation capable to think of themselves not only in terms of the obvious national identity but further, treating themselves as the Europeans. Higher education is crucial for the European identity to develop. Because of the encouragement of the European Union to continue post-secondary education, most of the Y Generation graduated from universities, are students or plan to be them in the future. They are well acquainted with the opportunities which the EU offers them and they know how to use them.

Higher education, and its links to research and innovation, plays an essential role in economic growth providing highly qualified employees and articulate citizens. Both groups are crucial for Europe to create prosperity and new places to work. If Europe wants to develop the Knowledge Triangle and be more competitive in the fields of research, education and innovation, the systems of national higher education, in each of the member country, must be able to effectively meet the requirements of the knowledge economy. The Council of the European Union reaffirms that there is the need of modernisation of European universities because research, education and innovation are the key elements to improve Europe’s competitiveness and create a knowledge-based society and economy. It stresses also the significance of the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) and the sub-programmes which it includes. The LLP’s budget for 2007 to 2013 is nearly €7 billion to be spent on a wide range of actions regarding study visits, exchanges and networking activities. It concentrates on offering mobility opportunities to talented and motivated students, researchers, teachers and lecturers in the context of the European Research Area (ERA).

The ERA, described as a single labour market for researchers, strengthens university-based research. To realise its assumptions, there should be a strong link between education and innovation. In the report prepared by the Commission to the European Council, the elements of the Knowledge Triangle are referred to as three missions which implementation should be supported through partnerships between European universities and industry. In order to improve the research mission of universities, ERA assumes that Europe should be made a more attractive place for a research career. The key areas here are open recruitment, grants, pension rights, attractive employment and enhanced skills, training and experience of researchers.

Europe needs a borderless European Research Area in order to be an innovation leader. Companies often have to make use of the knowledge developed by universities, as well as cooperate with other national and foreign companies, including the competitors. ERA is especially needed to overcome the fragmentation of European research which prevents Europe from fulfilling the research and innovation potential. It facilitates exchanges across borders, too. The main objective of ERA is to establish and develop the ‘fifth freedom’, i.e. the freedom of movement of knowledge. What is more, it makes an attempt to develop a mutual understanding between the actors of research and innovation (for instance SMEs, large companies, universities and public research centres) which leads to frequent cooperation across the European Union. The crucial role of universities is to provide ERA with human resources. Reciprocally, universities need a close connection to cutting-edge research to provide the highest quality of education. Therefore, significant efforts are made to strengthen the single market, education and training, and to incentivise private investment in research and innovation.

Student opinion poll

The purpose of the following inquiry was to verify the implementation and results of the Lisbon Strategy in the field of education from the perspective of Polish students. At first, the study was designed to evaluate the Lifelong Learning Programme and its four sub-programmes, i.e. Comenius, Erasmus, Grundtvig and Leonardo da Vinci. However, due to the fact that 95% of respondents took part in Erasmus sub-programme, more accurate would be to say that the conducted research evaluates the impact of Erasmus on higher education in Poland and identifies opportunities to increase the effectiveness of this programme in the future. The research is useful because it pinpoints the benefits and drawbacks of the strategy from the perspective of young Poles.

A survey investigation was conducted in 2011 in a form of a questionnaire and followed by a deepened qualitative and quantitative analysis. Its aim was to describe the factual, accurate data and characteristics of those students who were able to take advantage of the Erasmus exchange programme and to create causal relationships when variables affected one another. The target group of this study consisted of a hundred full-time and part-time Polish students attending post-secondary education institutions in various regions of Poland. They received thirteen detailed questions, both open and closed, regarding their temporal stay abroad, their concerns before the exchange and expectations concerning a term or a year as an exchange student. The study helped in gathering the information about potential difficulties the students had to face after returning to their home country, too.

The survey used in this research reached more women (77%) than men (23%). What is more, the vast majority of them (92%) declared to study full-time. Owing to that, it may be assumed that female full-time students take the opportunity to learn abroad more frequently than men and the girls who decided to study part-time. It is also visible in the

figures provided by the European Commission which prove that 61.1% of the students are women.9

The questionnaire began with asking the respondents to point in which country they spent the exchange. Nearly one fourth of the students was sent to Italy. Other popular countries were Denmark, Portugal, Germany, France and Spain. Each of those countries was visited by approximately 10% of the answerers. These countries are considered the most popular destinations according to the European Commission, too. On the other hand, Poland is regarded as one of the top ‘sending’ country10.

As it was mentioned before, Erasmus was the best known and the most frequently (95%) used Lifelong Learning sub-programme. It left Leonardo da Vinci (1%), Comenius (1%) and other European programmes far behind. The data is not shocking due to the fact that Erasmus is confirmed to be the world’s most successful exchange programme11 which celebrates in 2012 its silver anniversary, under the meaningful slogan “Erasmus: changing lives, opening minds for 25 years”12. It is estimated that three million students have already benefited from the programme since it was created in 1987.13 Almost 2.5 million students were offered grants from Erasmus. For the period 2007-2013, the programme has a budget of €3.1 billion and its activities in 2009-2010 totalled not less than €459 million.14

The responders were also asked to indicate the sources of information from which they discovered the chance of taking part in a student exchange. In most cases, young people were told about the opportunity by their friends and teachers/lecturers (50%). One fourth of the answerers heard about Erasmus from students’ organizations and some people read about it on-line (8%). The students fully agreed that there is still too little information and people are not familiar enough with the European strategies and their objectives. They consider little media attention as the main problem which should be tackled to shape the European identity, and therefore, improve the effectiveness of the strategies. This topic is often raised by many authors who suggest creating a big information campaign in order to attract the people’s interest in the current Europe 2020 Strategy and make them aware of the positive effects it has on their home countries.

The research revealed the main reasons why young Poles decided to leave their country and spent a term abroad. Most of the students emphasized that they were driven by a desire to find a well-paid job in the future and become more competitive and attractive job seekers (65%). The British Council also recommends and highly praises taking part in Erasmus15 and enumerates benefits which students may expect from this programme. At once, the first advantage on the list corresponds to the students’ expectations to stand out in the job market thanks to, for instance, a great addition to the CV. What is more, other advantages like improving language and life skills, having fun and broadening horizons and cultural awareness correspond to the students’ most often indicated reasons of the exchange. Many of the respondents stressed the possibility to experience an unforgettable adventure (61%). More than a half of the students admitted that their aim was to improve their linguistic skills (56%) and every second person wanted to broaden their knowledge in terms of history and culture of a given foreign country claiming that it would provide them with an international perspective. The British Council highlighted other advantages of taking part in Erasmus, too. These are receiving academic recognition for the study or work period abroad, getting mobile, studying the subject in different contexts and receiving financial support in a form of a grant.16

Another significant issue raised in the questionnaire was the level in which the major studied abroad was similar to the one studied in the home country. Two third of the responders were pleased with the fact that the major was the same or very closely related to the one studied in the country. However, one third of the students complained that the material was covered only a little or not enough. Such a situation was uncomfortable and inconvenient for the students who, after returning to the home country, had to pass all the exams, without any chance to recognize ECTS credits and grades. Unfortunately, these situations are not rare. Although ECTS were introduced in order to help in recognizing the studies between various institutions, the final decision is the responsibility of professors involved in exchanges, admission officials and employers.

The Poles were also asked to compare the theory of the student exchange programme with practice. The answerers were supposed to highlight the matters which appeared to be different from what they had previously expected. The European Commission provided students with an average monthly grant of €25717 which aim was to cover students’ accommodation and basic expenses. The research revealed that in most cases the sum was insufficient for the students (65%) who had to spend more money while staying in the foreign country than they expected before participating in the exchange. In order to obtain the sum of money that they needed, the students often searched abroad for part-time jobs gaining experience as both, exchange students, as well as employees in a foreign country. What follows, nearly all of the Polish students (99%) emphasized that they gained new, interesting experience while being abroad.

A good piece of news for Polish universities resulted from the survey. The responders (71%) admitted that the level of given lectures and the contribution the students have to make in order to get a credit in Poland are both comparable to those

13 Ibid.
represented by other European countries. Moreover, 66% of the answerers claimed that exams taken abroad are not more difficult than those in a home country. Still, one fourth of the respondents described their exams as much more difficult, which might be caused, for instance, by an insufficient level of foreign language in a particular field. However, there is also a negative piece of news due to the fact that the majority of students (72%) believe that they have learnt more while being abroad than they would have learnt staying in the country. It might mean that the classes abroad are run in a more effective way, with the usage of more innovative technologies or that the process of memorizing is better when the students change their environment and are not yet fully settled. Despite common opinion, 89% of the answerers consider the requirements, obligatory to fulfill before participating in the students exchange, as simple and not requiring a lot of effort.

Subsequently, the responders were asked to precise what kind of problems they had to tackle while being abroad. 53% of the students mentioned that the necessity of the daily usage of a foreign language was not troublesome at all. Nowadays, a great number of people speak perfect English, and therefore, a student exchange is not treated as the time to learn the language but rather to break the speech barrier and start using the language freely. Three fourth of the answerers claimed that nonverbal signals and communication with the foreigners was also simple and did not cause any misunderstandings. No one declared to experience the culture shock, that is why it may be assumed that mass media and the constant mingling of cultures, have immunized people against the bewilderment caused by the diversity of cultures. In the case of Internet accessibility, 76% of the responders did not have problems with the Internet connection but nearly one fourth of the students had to search for the places in which they could use the Internet. The students fully agreed that they left their home country with completely no stereotypical conceptions, opinions and images. Young people do not use simplistic and inaccurate generalizations about foreigners and do not categorize them in any way. However, 61% of Polish students admitted that they encountered foreign students who stereotypically perceived Poland and its inhabitants. The respondents did not feel offended and pointed out that fixed opinions of Poles can be altered by making good impression on others while staying abroad. 89% of the answerers claim that they had at least good relationship with foreign students. It means that mutual dealings with people of different cultures were positive, and potential social and business connections for the future were made.

97% of the responders would participate in another student exchange if they had such an opportunity. It proves that Erasmus is a very attractive programme for Polish students and they eagerly take part in it. The majority of the answerers (57%) admitted that there was a possibility to do an internship while being an exchange student, so they decided to spend the time abroad the most profitably they could. Polish interns abroad show foreign employers that they can be efficient employees, internships done abroad can also prove Polish employers that the potential candidates are able to work in a multicultural environment and speak fluently in a foreign language.

Surprisingly, 42% of Poles claimed that they had to take care of themselves while being abroad because they had no guardian there. Most of the students (61%) claimed also that the home university was not interested in the process of their exchange and did not contact them at all.

There were three main issues which Polish students found difficult after returning to their country. First of all, they missed the lifestyle, cuisine and climate (72%) of the country they lived in. What is more, they (67%) were no longer in touch with some of their friends or the frequency of their contacts decreased. Last but not least, they (50%) were no longer treated with privilege by lecturers and other academic staff and often had to pass overdue exams (41%).

Three fourth of the responders looks forward to working abroad in the future. 70% of students believe that the ability to communicate with people of different cultures has substantially improved. 64% claim that they became more self-confident, open minded and tolerant after participating in the exchange. 87% admit that they can deal with stress more effectively and 46% of Poles see themselves as less stressed. Nearly three fourth of the answerers declare that they have more respect for foreigners than they had before the exchange.

Students have also suggested some changes which might be considerable for the Polish post-secondary institutions. 85% highlighted that universities in Poland should invest more in modern methods of teaching, such as trips, trainings and additional courses. Young people often emphasized that there is too much theory and not enough practice at Polish schools. 88% advice to increase the number of students participating in the exchange and 54% would like their university to introduce a course in history and culture of the foreign countries. Such additional classes could be run after regular classes so that they would not clash with other subjects. The vast majority of students agreed that there should be more classes run in English (95%), and therefore more classes and contact with Erasmus students from other countries. It would enable Poles to be in constant touch with people from different cultures without leaving their own country. It is especially crucial for those students who, from various reasons, do not want to go abroad.

The last question was concerning students’ feelings and emotions which they experienced after returning home. It turned out that Poles were not pleased with the idea of coming back home. 81% of them felt sorrow and only 5% felt happy to meet their old friends and family.

International cooperation in the field of education has an essential meaning. It prepares students and graduates to a dialogue among various cultures. Frequent student and academic staff exchanges, the preparation of common scientific projects and other forms of cooperation with foreign post-secondary institutions contribute to the constant improvement of qualifications among participants of exchanges and an increased number of Poles taking part in international conferences and seminars. Karwińska (2009: 20) adds that higher schools make an attempt to prepare their graduates for various functions in a modern society and knowledge economy. They also emphasize the necessity of teaching students international cooperation and preparing them to work in the field of international business.

Even if it has its shortcomings, like often unrecognizable ECTS or an insufficient grant (both to enhance in the future), the Poles enumerated plenty of advantages which a student exchange definitely has. While enabling the young generation
to gain new, interesting experience, it broadens their horizons, makes them experience how foreigners live, think and behave and become familiar with their history and culture. Thanks to that, they are more and more aware and able to perceive things from various perspectives. As the result, they have a chance to get a dream job in a multicultural environment in the future due to the fact that employers value good verbal and nonverbal communication, flawless negotiation skills with foreign partners and they intend on eliminating all possible faux pas which may ruin business transactions.

The European Research Area links the higher education, research and business, and therefore EU may develop more smoothly. The three sides of the knowledge triangle involve entrepreneurial skills, innovative, creative attitudes and constant interaction between stakeholders. The task of public policies is to encourage partnership between universities, institutions, high-tech and business centres. It will help to improve the transfer of knowledge to the market in a faster and more effective way.  

Conclusions

4 000 European higher education institutions from 33 countries participate in Erasmus, and even more are willing to join. This programme is an extremely effective tool in creating and shaping European identity among young people. After spending time abroad, students consider possible migrations, e.g. because of a chance to find a more satisfying job. They consider getting married abroad and building families there. With so well-informed citizens who share such a positive attitude towards Europe and its development, the Europe 2020 Strategy has a chance to succeed.

However, the young generation is just a group of the whole European society and the outgoing Polish Erasmus students constitute about 2.5% of the graduate population. There is a need to make the other groups as Europe-oriented as the youth. In order to make European Union strategies and actions work, the whole European society has to be well-informed, to understand the purpose of those actions and has to be willing to share the responsibility for the development of the European Union. If people are not familiar with Europe’s actions, they will never identify with them. They need to be experienced in EU, only then they will start to care about it. It would enable a better flow of information, knowledge and intellectual property transfer, as well as the growth of the European Research Area. Sharing knowledge and providing open access to information via the Internet is the best way to make people aware. The lack of European identity among most of the people is an obstacle difficult but necessary to hamper in order to make the assumptions of the Europe 2020 Strategy meet.

Shaping the European identity will one day enable Europe to become dynamic and the most competitive knowledge-based economy, leaving behind the United States. It is possible only with the Europeans.

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