

Zbigniew Stempnakowski*

Szczecin University

ACADEMIC ENTREPRENEURSHIP – LOCAL APPROACH

Summary

The article pointed out the important, from the point of view of the town and the local market participants, business environment institutions. Their current status, trends, strengths and weaknesses were also discussed. Their role was emphasized and the emerging local initiatives were identified. The author reviewed the issues which affect local colleges and universities in the context of the needs of the city and the region. Critical areas of change which must take place were identified here. The author also characterized a number of outreach activities which have been undertaken in the area of academic entrepreneurship in the local market.

Keywords: academic entrepreneurship, business environment institutions

1. Business environment institutions

As the analysis of the City Council of Szczecin shows, the city of Szczecin is a city of the first choice for young people living in the metropolitan area, hence the high percentage of student groups from outside of Szczecin. At the same time a large group of young people from Szczecin, when choosing higher education studies, chooses other cities: Poznań, Wrocław, Kraków, Gdańsk and Warsaw. Statistics in this area are not amazing, most of the universities in Szczecin are at low places in the rankings of universities popularity. It does not build a good environment for young people to stay here in Szczecin. The city indicates the priority directions of development and they are mostly ICT and a wide spectrum of BPO centres. In recent years, the city has become a leader in the growth of the office space of the highest standard. Negligence and the fact that the region used

* kazio@data.pl

to be treated as uninteresting in terms of investing resulted in a significant delay in the increase of office infrastructure. Today, however, the situation in this respect has become much better. The finishing budget period of the EU has brought many pro-development investments being subsidised. Business institutions which create and stimulate the development trends of the city, have grown significantly.

In the area of ICT the leader seems to be an image – building investment of the city called TechnoPark Pomerania (almost PLN 100 million). This strong centre of stimulating business development grows at some distance from the city centre, close to the faculties of ZUT. TechnoPark is planned to enhance and strengthen the development of small businesses in the ICT industry. The potential of the place, which ultimately is to take an area of nearly 10 ha, is significant. The place which has been chosen, excellent transport links with the city, the scale of the project, the potential of the involvement of the people from the industry and the vision of the development of the city – they all encourage the thought over the future of the city, which is to be based on the rapidly growing businesses which generate tax revenues for the city and modern workplaces for graduates.

An important, from the point of view of the development of the city, institution is also a more and more dynamically developing centre called RCIiT ZUT. It is an important “window on the world” for the whole academic environment of West Pomeranian University of Technology (RCiITT new headquarters project – PLN 23 million). From the historical point of view, one can notice a strong increase in competence, knowledge and skills of RCIiT staff fundraising, which gives good grounds for the future in the area of stimulating the commercialisation of research results. Many actions have been taken in the area linking practice of economic life with science, just to mention regular internships and training. An interesting project is one of the internships at a college for representatives of business. It is very controversial from the point of view of some of the workers because it undermines the effectiveness and quality of the educational offer directed at students. On the other hand, it allows to show the employers’ point of view and their expectations regarding future employees directly to the student, still while learning.

Another important but relatively young institution is Maritime Technology Transfer Centre at the Maritime Academy in Szczecin. Maritime Academy in Szczecin is seen as a school which puts particular emphasis on information technology. It is shown, for example, by the list of recent proposals which received EU grants or by a significant increase in the amount of money involved

in its projects. The direction which MTTC will follow is seen by an event which was held in October this year, namely the conference called “The transfer of knowledge in the marine industry.” The nature of the event was given by a lot of guests from abroad as well as by English presentations focusing on showing the latest developments of the university in the form of technologies ready for commercialization. It is also characteristic that one of the presented technologies immediately received support in the form of subsidising and setting up a company by PFP within Pomeranus Seed project, which will operate at TechnoPark.

As a strong centre for services grows Faculty of Management and Economics of Services at the University of Szczecin. The Department received a large grant for the project in the area of contact between business and science in the form of the construction of the Inter-Service Centre Lab (almost PLN 70 million). It will provide a powerful argument for investing further centres of BPO in the region, thanks to training employees in the area. An important element will be the full integration of the academic environment and business in a number of facilities. Some space is being created which allows to host entrepreneurs in order to establish cooperation. At the same time it gives opportunities for students to participate in the implementation of commercial projects on the international scale. The complex which is being created is to be integrated with the Department, by which it will become an infrastructure component of the university. The staff of the Department will also be able to use it. It remains only a matter of time how the capabilities of the Centre will be included in the educational offer addressed to students and the local community.

In the local community and region EU funds allocated through the VLO and discussed at the meetings of the Regional Thematic Network play a stimulating role. The projects which are carried out have a number of qualities useful to the local environment, reducing unemployment, improving competitiveness, supporting innovative solutions. These projects also contribute to the development of entrepreneurship and self-employment. However, observing the academic environment and the aspects of commercialisation of science and technology in it, there is still a lot to be done. A short visit at all of our local centers of knowledge transfer as well as at those of local authorities, creates an afterthought that the actions which are taken there seem disorganized and that they lack support. Each of these centres points to the ignorance of the potential of the universities in many commercial areas as the main problem. In general terms, this could be described as a series of actions to strengthen the position of a particular centre without

coordination and cooperation with any others. Universities coordinated by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education are required to meet very different criteria. They are obliged to take care of meeting a number of requirements which are completely at odds with the situation on the local labor market. Their attention and all the energy are focused on the development of human resources (here considered as the sum of certain items; publications, points, further degrees) and on respecting the Accreditation Commission guidelines, on which both the decision whether to be or not to be, and about the supply of funds, depend. This situation builds a gap between the market and the university, the lack of understanding of the needs, reluctance to any change, and sometimes the inability to change when they go beyond the standard set of possible actions. The fact of being effectively detached from the environment of employers as well as being reluctant to adopting the suggestions and changes which affect the current operation of the higher education system are not conducive to training future employees. Disregarding proposals to explore business-related institutions for education within university walls, according to their own criteria, is characteristic here.

2. Directions of changes of learning and teaching

The city at the local level would like differently profiled fields of study, other information resources about the potential of graduates, greater flexibility in education, a wider range of contacts with economic reality, more active involvement in the development of the graduate profile. A major problem is deficiencies in collecting and flow of information on the quality and direction of education, number of graduates, subjects of research which is carried out at various levels of education. These statistics flow from the centre on an aggregate basis to the numbers which lose their reflection in reality, to the numbers which do not allow in a real and deliberate way to shape the direction of change. The city applying for the placement of a particular investment in the metropolitan area has still too little information about the potential of the employees' education. In the City Council there is Department of Service of Investment and Enterprise, which is working robustly. However, even there with no information flowing directly from universities, you can not effectively attract investors in the planned lines of business.

The same happens when trying to assess research directions of universities in Szczecin, when making an overall summary indicating the strengths and

weaknesses of science in the region. This information is not available not only for the rulers of the city, but also for the university centres of knowledge and technology transfer. The lack of such information prevents the effective action in the areas of knowledge commercialisation of universities themselves. You can even deduce a more radical proposal – these institutions in their activities do not care about intellectual values “produced” at universities, there are no institutions managing, on behalf of the university, intellectual property and technology solutions which would commercialise solutions and realise revenues to the budget of the research unit. Such activities mean mismanagement in terms of the market, but in the case of state universities, this allegation never occurs. Intellectual property has real value which changes over time. The management of these values is a real challenge associated with changes in education funding, aspects of demographic trends, directions in the development of the local and global market.

You can see some proposals for changes, grassroots initiatives with the goal of improving the aggregation and availability of information. An interesting project is the Matrix platform implemented by the West Pomeranian Business School (more than PLN 13 million). The project aims to strengthen relations between the business community and academics. What is contained in the system – a base of knowledge, experts, practical training and an e-learning platform – in assumptions is to allow to deepen the knowledge of the barriers and needs of the education sector. Whether this is going to happen, in fact, one should doubt. Looking back, building more platforms, where you can sign up and participate voluntarily, does not make them more popular. What was missing here is the overall look, the transfer of some powers to the platform for all universities operating in the region. The features of the platform which are emphasized as innovative are simply obvious elements of this class of solutions. Waiting for the ones who are willing to cooperate is going to be a failure. The point is not that we should be forced to register in yet another place with yet another function, but that it is important that such a platform is integrated with the existing university intranet systems. Such a system would provide certain benefits to grassroots individuals, but in its current form it is not possible.

Another initiative in this area of interesting and important ideas is Digital Library at Maritime University in Szczecin. A project aiming at remote access to the resources and knowledge of the maritime area, thanks to funding from the EU (about PLN 2 million) has generated a great place being a good example

of how to popularize knowledge of the sea. Implementation of a modern library system, enabling the use of resources on-line, permanent digitising of research and keeping up with conducting of publications produced at the Academy – all these give grounds to believe that popularising an application approach to publications is going to become wider. Again, it is a very interesting idea, but unfortunately, an individual one, whereas there is need for a comprehensive approach to the subject in all the universities of the region. Comparing this project with other investments such as: an educational portal – a project for Szczecin and Koszalin – the scale of investment of about PLN 11 million, it would be appropriate to integrate activities.

A difficult issue which is not taken at universities is placing some components which shape entrepreneurial attitudes into the process of teaching. There are no good examples of implementing the content of teaching from the area of academic entrepreneurship. The existing curricula of study, which include content from the microeconomics or certain areas of entrepreneurship, are offered in such a theoretical range that they are quite distant from the realities of the free market. It is quite incomprehensible why in the era of increasing emphasis on self-employment, there is no practical knowledge transferred for students whatsoever. Just as the computer science once won the right to exist at all fields of study as an essential part of modern education and skills, now the knowledge of entrepreneurship should be an element offered at all universities. It is a fact that not everyone is going to be an entrepreneur, but looking at the statistics of the growing numbers of self-employed people and the share of this type of business in the income of the state budget, it seems necessary to raise the importance of this type of knowledge. It is worth to promote initiatives strongly linking practical aspects and the knowledge on support opportunities through business environment institutions. The current prospect of EU funds puts particular emphasis on the discussed area, and it is said to be similar in the next EU budget.

There is also no permanent system of students' practice treated as a viable way to transfer the knowledge about the requirements of employers. The current system of students' practice rewards only those who can skillfully skip this item. This system does not provide real opportunities for practice caregivers of individual fields of study. It is still considered by the student community as "a sad necessity". Promoting the deliberate creation of your own career path fails here especially, promoting here meaning acquiring knowledge and practice for the next stage, which is entering the labour market. An initiative in this area has been

shown by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education. It imposed an obligation on colleges and universities to trace and monitor graduates' further careers. However, this imposing is left without any transfer of resources or good practice in this area. Whether and how universities will fulfill this obligation, is difficult to guess. Nevertheless, the direction of change seems to be right, American universities' approach to the role of the graduate in creating the popularity of a particular university and considerable influence of opinion centres in many environments being an example.

3. Popularising initiatives in the area of entrepreneurship

Another area of actions in the field of academic entrepreneurship or commercialisation of research are dissemination activities directed to the very beneficiaries. Important but still not very popular initiatives are various competitions for the best academic or scientific piece of work.

A very good example is the organisation by the Mayor of Szczecin of an annual competition (this year is the fifth edition) addressed to the scientific community. The competition, whose goal is to select the best research papers in three categories (diploma, master's and doctoral), promotes the areas of new technology and innovation. Therefore, the main objective is to promote an application approach to the scientific area and link research areas with the business environment – the business world. A similar competition takes place at ZUT, led by RCIiT (fifth edition already) – although the amount of incoming works is basically constant, their amount, meaning applicability here, improves. Above a university was indicated which puts strong emphasis on information technology (Medical University of Szczecin) – which organised a nationwide school contest for secondary school students in the area of IT – “Interactive IT product”. The, by all means, recommendable initiative was created with interestingly designed prizes (practice, internships, work in the profession), apart from the prizes consisting of money and property. The way of rewarding points to the expectations concerning the winners, who are to be oriented to practical aspects of gaining skills and further areas of career. The way of offering rewards in such competitions in the region should be strictly aimed at promoting entrepreneurship, incubating ideas (eg by Technopark) or supporting the prototyping and starting a business.

Various types of supporting institutions play an important role in the region as regards the support of the “young business”. These are incubators of enterprise,

which are located at most universities, projects carried out by economic foundations or major city institutions (Technopark). One of the most interesting projects you can indicate here is the creation of two local branches of Academic Incubators of Entrepreneurship located at the major universities. As follows from interviews and information obtained from the local director of that foundation, new branches are planned to be opened, in Gorzow Wlk. and Koszalin. Business LinkAIP is also likely to be opened in Szczecin, but it is to happen in the long term. The idea of the foundation is very interesting but the popularity is low. The awareness of the existence of this type of organisation, which gives a real opportunity to test their own business with minimal financial risk in case of failure, is basically residual. On Szczecin incubation stage, a still fully professional approach to the subject is seen at RCIiT and Technopark Pomerania, the latter, however, is profiled in the field of ICT, and RCIiT is addressed to the scientific community of ZUT. Unfortunately, in this area the largest university in Szczecin does not look positive, the existing incubator at the University of Szczecin is not a very robust unit, perhaps because of the conditions of premises and staff. A good example, but still impossible to assess, is the Inter-Service Lab – but that's a matter of the future. It is not possible at present to assess the institution and identify the advantages and possible disadvantages due to the fact that the investment process is in progress.

Apart from infrastructure, an important part of local conditions are people connected to all sorts of initiatives. A key enterprise in the area of ICT is the foundation called NetCamp. The foundation activities have long been recognised not only in the local market but also from the further perspective. It has received a number of awards and distinctions, which clearly demonstrates just what potential it brings. Currently, the Foundation celebrates its fifth birthday and has become a stable, but still vigorously reaching its goals, institution. Different scale initiatives are seen from Technopark, conventions of local IT professionals, and a recently organised initiative – Szczecin Get Inspired. There is a real need for such events and this need is proved by the popularity (the same number of participants as the number of people on a reserve list). A similar in spirit, but on a smaller scale, is an initiative implemented by the Zone 89 (the project for nearly PLN 2 million), meetings with interesting people from the world of business and science, workshops and training, and important, at present, contacts, namely networking.

Looking whollstically at he metropolitan area of Szczecin, at the actions taken in creating academic entrepreneurship, at the utilitarian view on the research carried out at universities, colleges and independent institutions, one can be a little optimistic. Both the scale of the needs and the scale of the projects implemented let us see a lot of activities which are and have to be taken in the future. However, system thinking and noticing problems on a larger scale seem essential. A small piece of reality which is seen by decision – makers in local institutions, does not show real local issues in a global scale.

PRZEDSIĘBIORCZOŚĆ AKADEMICKA – UJĘCIE LOKALNE

Streszczenie

W artykule wskazano na ważne, z punktu widzenia miasta i uczestników lokalnego rynku, instytucje otoczenia biznesu. Omówiono ich obecny stan, kierunki rozwoju oraz silne i słabe strony. Podkreślono ich rolę oraz wskazano tworzące się inicjatywy lokalne. Autor dokonał przeglądu problemów, jakie dotyczą lokalne uczelnie wyższe w kontekście potrzeb miasta i regionu. Wskazano krytycznie obszary zmian, jakie muszą nastąpić. Autor scharakteryzował wiele działań popularyzatorskich, jakie zostały podjęte w obszarze przedsiębiorczości akademickiej na lokalnym rynku.

Słowa kluczowe: przedsiębiorczość akademicka, instytucje otoczenia biznesu.