Czego uczy nas historia gospodarcza?

12 ROZMÓW NA TRUDNE CZASY

Is education free and has it always been so?

Prof. Paweł Grata and Dr Krzysztof Popiński from the Wrocław University of Economics discuss.

Paweł Grata: Welcome to the latest conversation in the series "What does economic history teach us? 12 questions for tough times". Today my guest is Dr Krzysztof Popinski from the Wrocław University of Economics. We are going to talk about education. The talk is part of a project funded by the Minister of Science and Higher Education's programme called The Social Responsibility of Science, which aims to explain how economic history can help us answer the difficult questions of today. The topic of today's talk is the question of whether it should be free, why it should be free, what it looked like in the past versus what it looks like today. Doctor, what does "free education" mean?

Krzysztof Popiński: Free education is, in the simplest, most common sense, perhaps even more than understood, education for which parents and pupils do not pay. But of course, this is a certain contractual situation, because everything always costs money, and if the student or parent doesn't pay for the education, then someone else bears the costs.

Yes, free education is a bit of a buzzword. One might even say that it is a substitute for what we are actually going to talk about. Economic history, the history of farming is also the history of money, the history of costs. As you mentioned, free education always costs someone, someone always pays for it. Free education is universal education, we can probably relate that, because it was with the universalization of education that this notion of free education came into history.

Yes, these two features are absolutely linked, and we can also say, in a certain simplification, that the universalisation, even the introduction at certain levels of education as compulsory for children and then also for young people, was also linked to the introduction of free education. Or to put it another way - it was not possible to impose, at the same time in the interests of the state, compulsory education on broad masses of society who could not afford it. Consequently, successive states made a commitment to cover these bases of the education system from their revenues.

You said *in the interest of the state*. Where was this interest? Why did the states decide to bear such a huge cost of providing free education for all?

Well here it has always been, until now and I think there will be such two main sets of reasons in the future, why bear the cost of educating the broad public when perhaps everyone should educate themselves. But there are two issues here. One is the economic interest of the state, its economic, technical and civilisational development, and here very strongly, precisely in the course of the 19th century and especially in the 20th century, demands appeared, intensified and began to be realised in the area of massification or even popularisation of education so that this society would be educated, would be able to participate effectively in economic activity and for the benefit not only of itself but also of the economy. And that was essential. Of course, there is also this other reason, the so-called social justice strand. I think they are somehow interrelated. They cannot be separated from each other either. I think it's that if something is just, it doesn't mean that at the same time it can't also be economically beneficial.

We are talking about the nineteenth century, this is also a bit of a paradox, one could conjecture, although easily explained. Our aim is to show these processes that took place in economic history and to show how it came about that today we have a certain state of affairs, which we will talk about later in our conversation. The nineteenth century is the century of the dominance of the liberal doctrine, which says that everyone has to look after themselves, everyone has to look after their own interests and secure their own needs, and at the same time this is when the state goes about offering its citizens, even forcing education on its citizens. How do you combine these two seemingly opposing approaches?

Well, here there are indeed two, at least two such basic different models of approach to the organisation of the education system. There is the liberal model, and as liberal as the Anglo-Saxon model is, of course, and there is the model where it is, as it were, part of social responsibility, of the citizen, of individual ability, of entrepreneurship, of responsibility, for example, to educate one's children, to educate oneself or one's employees, to raise their competence, but at one's own expense. On the other hand, there is the other model, which is born more in continental Europe, here we have Germany, above all, the Scandinavian countries, but also France and a number of other highly developed countries, which, while experiencing industrialisation, while accelerating the process of industrialisation, at the same time introduced universal education systems, because they recognised that this was necessary, even essential, to achieve their political, social and economic goals.

Yes, because we must remember that some of the first countries to introduce compulsory schooling were the Scandinavian states. Countries that had no

resources, no coal deposits, no iron ore, very limited possibilities for agricultural development, and at the same time, very quickly, at the end of the 19th century, joined the ranks of those richest countries in the world.

And thanks to what was later defined as human capital, that is, something which also consists very seriously of education, an education achieved also within the framework of the universal, compulsory education system being created. which would include all those areas of knowledge and types of skills which would be useful for functioning in the economy and in social and state life.

Yes, only we have to remember that universal education, compulsory schooling in the 19th century concerned what level of education?

Actually, we can say that until the beginning of the 20th century, until the interwar period, it concerned mainly, almost exclusively, primary education. It is also important to know that this was a process that took place at an uneven pace, in different areas, in different countries, in different ways. Nevertheless, if you look at it from a long-term perspective, you can see that it was happening. And it has progressed essentially in one direction, namely, the increasing spread of an education system based on universal, compulsory and free education. Here we are talking about the very period when it concerned only primary education, and this was really accomplished over decades, raised gradually even within primary school. In the beginning it was just basic skills that children could master in the first two years of schooling. And somewhere towards the end of the nineteenth century, from the 1980s onwards, when this system became more widespread, there was already talk of primary school in the modern sense, that is, up to that thirteenth, fourteenth year, up to which time the state also provided, in its own interest, the opportunity for education.

In its own interest, in the interest of the economy.

Yes, yes. As much as possible, even to the order of economic circles aware of, expecting such a workforce that would be able to cope with the new technical and technological trends, expecting efficient workers for their era.

And conscious workers, because it is enough here to recall, for example, the situation in the post-war period in Poland, when mass industrialisation clashed with the barrier of unprepared workers, who were unskilled, came from the countryside and were unable to take up certain jobs. But we may come back to that in a moment,

whereas the question is when did this level of free education, did free education start to extend to older age groups?

Free education at the secondary level and also at the tertiary level is the period of the second half of the 20th century, after the Second World War. Then it became widespread, but also not at all everywhere. This is the model in which, again, those precursor countries in general in terms of dissemination and introduction of free of charge led the way, namely Germany and the Scandinavian countries. They introduced free secondary education and higher education after 1945. However, there were also, of course, elements of the system that were not public schools, such free schools, but were private and paid. but they only supplemented the system; it was mainly public, free schools, already secondary and higher, but this has not become the norm all over the world. Again, the Anglo-Saxons differ significantly here, especially the United States, but also the United Kingdom itself, and it is interesting that within the United Kingdom the individual countries have solved this problem differently, and so in England we have fee-paying universities, and in Scotland we have public, free schools, which is also the reason why a relatively large number of Polish students ended up in Scottish universities after the year 2000.

Referring precisely to Polish realities, we know that the 19th century was a time of partitions. And here we can also point to the fundamental differences that existed at the time between the various partitions in terms of access to education.

Yes, yes. This is the heritage that the reborn Poland had to face in 1918. It is a heritage that brought with it huge differences between the areas of the individual partitions. We had the area of the former Prussian partition, in which education, the level of enrolment was very high.

But education in German...

Yes, of course. The Prussian state, while pursuing its education policy, simultaneously aimed at Germanisation and the creation of Polish-speaking subjects, as they called themselves, they expected, such of their subjects, or later citizens, who would be assimilated by the German majority, i.e. the school language was German, of course. On the other hand, as far as the other partitions were concerned, especially the Russian partition, where the spread of primary education was very low, here it was necessary to make up for it as quickly as possible after 1918 in Poland, because it had enormous consequences for the civilisational backwardness, it made some corrective processes impossible, it smashed against such a barrier as the almost universal illiteracy in the

eastern areas of the Republic. These differences were also very, very large. Since we are already here in Poland and at this time, let us say that in 1919, compulsory, universal, free primary education was introduced by law, but in the Polish reality, the pursuit of such unification, which, by the way, was carried out with great success by the end of the twentieth century, was necessary and it was successful, while secondary and higher education remained inaccessible to the masses of those who did not have adequate financial security.

That is to say, it remained practically until the outbreak of war something rather elitist than universal. And now, after the war, the system changes. At the same time, the changes you mentioned in the West, where free secondary education and, in many countries, free tertiary education are becoming commonplace, where a welfare state is being built, a welfare state that stems from recommendations dating back to the war, and, indeed, the extent of state support for educational needs is very high. And what is happening in the countries of the so-called people's democracy camp, the socialist countries?

What we are dealing with here is a revolution in the education system, a revolution in the enrolment of society at various levels. There are also some myths connected with that era, as the communist authorities considered the elimination of illiteracy to be a success, which had in fact been largely, if not eliminated, then minimised already in the inter-war period through the introduction and consistent application of compulsory primary education, at least. The "people's power" made education compulsory up to the age of 18 and also made education in vocational and secondary schools free of charge, as well as access to higher education, where it even tried to give preference to people from workers' and peasants' backgrounds, and even in the most dogmatic periods to exclude people from other social groups, especially at the very beginning, when there were still those circles which constituted the structure of the pre-war Republic. And this was undoubtedly achieved when we talk about the quantitative, formal dimension, but if we direct the discussion also to the qualitative level, then, unfortunately, this was much less the case.

And there is another important point to be made here. You talk about vocational education. This is indeed very important, even today, because it turns out that after 1989 vocational education was dismantled and today it is lacking. There are attempts to rebuild it, but here this vocational education has been developed in a way that is inadequate to the needs. Most young people went to vocational schools.

Yes, and they were often better off than when they went to university. These are the paradoxes of the communist system, in which the long, drawn-out education meant that once you entered the workforce, even as an engineer, you were in a worse situation in terms of pay and seniority than someone who, after a three-year vocational school. even sometimes only two years, as a skilled worker, had already been working somewhere for a good few years and had already reached a certain level of earnings and position in the workplace. Paradoxically, this system undermined the effects of higher education, because people did not know what to do with university graduates and were often unable to manage them effectively.

At the same time, however, the Polish United Workers' Party ruled on behalf of the working class, i.e. here this building up of a quantitative working class was also probably important in the creation of this system.

Ideology here often overshadowed pragmatism and, in the name of this ideology, some basic principles were forgotten, for example management, production, in some basics of economics, not to mention other elements of political or social reality.

You are researching the development of higher education in the 20th century. How would you quantitatively characterise this progress in this respect in relation to the inter-war period, and how does it relate to what it is today?

If one relates the quantum leap that took place in higher education after 1945 in the communist era to the inter-war period, one can speak of a tenfold increase in the number of students, several times the number of universities and their size. These changes in the size of education and its accessibility were also gigantic. However, this did not translate into the expected economic effects, because the increasing number of people with higher education, which was also desired at the time, preferred, technical education, did not translate into economic results. In turn, it can be said that after 1990 we also had a situation where the number of students multiplied, to over two million at its peak around 2008. This is an eightfold leap in relation to the data, to that maximum level during communist times in the late 1970s. This situation, however, brought with it, this quantitative leap brought with it after 1990, also certain qualitative changes, noticeable over time. Integration with the European Union, with the Western world, cooperation with the world of science, commercialisation, and the marketisation of the conditions for the functioning of education also had a positive impact on the quality of this expansion. It was not just ordered from the top down without regard to what was needed, as it was in the communist era. After 1990, it was increasingly the market that decided how many and

which specialists we needed, whereas previously this had been determined by socio-economic development plans based on political and ideological premises.

Another important difference is the emergence of public universities after 1989.

Well, yes, fee-paying universities have reappeared, as well as the possibility of studying at state universities on a fee-paying basis, I am thinking here of part-time studies. Alternatively, foreign students have appeared in greater numbers, although only after 2000, and these too pay, sometimes quite high tuition fees in their preferred fields of study. And indeed we currently have these two systems. One, which is funded for the most part by the state, these are state universities and private universities, based on tuition fees, but possibly also raising additional funds. At the present time, whether in Poland or elsewhere in the world, it would be difficult to find examples of a situation where purely state-subsidised state universities and purely tuition-based private universities operate side by side. At the moment we have a state of education in which both types of university are trying to raise additional funds, and often, paradoxically, functionally they are not so different from each other, only the owner is, of course, different. Well, and there are also various other consequences of which of these universities dominate a given system. However, does public or private education dominate.

Precisely, here we return to this fundamental question. Free education at various levels. Who pays for it? What is the leading model for financing, say, education at different levels? Because it will look different in higher education and different in primary education.

In the case of universities or lower-level schools, these are institutions financed from the state budget, from direct, indirect taxes. But not only that, because nowadays it is universities, including public universities, that supplement their sources of funding, often to a significant extent, with directions that were not used before. So they participate in and apply for various types of grants, be they research or teaching grants, whether national or international - here European Union funds play a very important role, for example in our area. There is also the area where, in the case of these essentially free universities, however, the costs of studies are passed on to students because they are unable to provide free, I do not know, accommodation, social conditions or all the necessary teaching aids and textbooks. In such an ideal, free system, all this is taken care of by the state, but this ideal system is rare and often these free studies can cost quite a lot. However, as far as universities which make their living from early years are concerned, they are also striving to make their mark or survive and develop on the

education market by creating and building their image, not only as a business based on making money, but also simply focusing on education, and therefore applying for various funds, approaching sponsors, developing their own system of scholarships or exemptions for students studying with them, who do not have to bear at least the full commercial costs. It's quite such a less obvious, more mixed system than it used to be.

An interesting observation comes to mind here. In the 19th century, developed, industrialising countries, thinking about the future, introduced compulsory education. sometimes even against the wishes of parents, who had to send their children to school, especially in the villages. Today, the value of education in the public mind is so high that many parents are willing to pay for their children's education, for a better education, for one that will give them better chances in the labour market.

It seems that here the middle class is precisely the social group that places such great importance on the education of its children and spends on this, on education in the broadest sense, much more than it should, within the framework of some kind of rational income distribution of the household budget, but gives it such a high priority that it foregoes many other expenditures because it considers it essential for the past of its offspring. This is an understanding, an appreciation of the role of education for individual, family or societal success, something that has grown enormously in our time. It seems to me that in spite of everything, the dissemination and assistance of the state, if not directly free of charge, but in education, it is taking place, it is progressing, it is spreading in successive countries and areas. it is changing its form at most, for example, a very interesting form in Poland, which used to be called vouchers or elsewhere in other countries in a different way, such a subsidising of an individual, individual educational decision, is a form of realisation of the dissemination and assistance of the state in the field of education.

This is how. Once coercion, today assistance. Creating equal opportunities. Today's principles of social justice are precisely about creating equal opportunities. Democratic states, states that are open to their citizens, are trying to create equal opportunities here. What about the future? How do you see the future of free education? Or education as such and its relationship to costs?

I think this ties in with what the future of the state is in general. The decreasing number of children and young people will obviously affect the education system. Ostensibly, it should reduce its costs and increase the possibilities for qualitative upgrading, paying more attention to individual teaching, more differentiated, and on the other hand, the

state will have less income, because fewer taxpayers will pay taxes, whether it will be able to afford sophisticated, elaborate policies in education and many other areas, this is where economists, demographers, sociologists worry.

It may be that this free education will also be less valuable.

It could be such a suspended privilege, which in practice will only be partially or poorly exercised. This is what one might fear most. Because when it comes to awareness of the need, precisely not arising only from a sense of social justice, but also from the profit of the state and the economy, this awareness is steadily growing. Only who will pay for it after all? Are the parents, who want to pay after all, more determined than before to ensure the future of their children through this education. Or the state, which also sees an interest in it, but which will have trouble balancing its budget. This is the challenge that will grow in the future.

In summary, then, one can draw the conclusion that free education was once a step towards modernity. And today, when this modernity has come, but demographic changes have also come, it may be that free education will not necessarily survive.

That education that was set up in the early 1900s was relatively cheap. It was the retired non-commissioned officer who was that first teacher, it was the priest or pastor, who simply on the margins of actually his priestly activities also taught children, while later these education systems developed, expanded, became more complicated and increasingly expensive. Let us also recall that the future of education is precisely the costs associated with the development of technology, which offers fantastic opportunities, but is also incredibly expensive. Also, today's school in whatever form, it will be more costly than in the past and increasingly costly

And I think this is where we will put the dot. The outlook is quite ambiguous, but certainly free education is something that builds society and shows the way that it is worth investing in education and worth investing in knowledge, as we all know well today. Our guest was Dr Krzysztof Popiński, Wroclaw University of Economics. Thank you very much for the interview .

Thank you very much.