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Poland is a Member State of the European Union. The country is relatively big with its 38 million inhabitants; of whom almost 6.6 million are pupils and students of secondary schools and more than 1.9 million are higher education students. Young people are eager to learn and regard gaining knowledge as an opportunity to be better prepared to the beginning of vocational career.

In recent years in Poland dynamic changes have taken place due to the economic transformation, which result in different economic status of polish families. Apart from wealthy families there are people that need assistance due to their financial standing. High unemployment rate (18%), lack of perspectives in the marginalized and defavoured areas, especially in the countryside, leads to big discrepancies between families and, in consequence, hinders access to full educational offer.

The educational resort sets one of its priorities in removing educational barriers which hinder access to education or make it impossible. The assistance is educational, which means that it is aimed directly at students and provides educational support for young people. Poverty often leads parents to concentrate first on the social needs. The State recognizes the necessity of supporting educational goals of children and adults. Access to schooling and learning is as important as providing meals and financial support.

In 2004 government of the Republic of Poland accepted the National Scholarship Program, which was implemented in polish educational law in January 2005.

Two kinds of assistance have been established: motivational and social.

Social assistance is aiming at providing equal opportunities to students from different communities, reducing differences in access to education and providing access to higher education institutions. It consists of social security (scholarship) and “circumstantial subvention”. Social scholarships are granted yearly to about 210 000 students.

Circumstantial subvention can be granted to students, who due to the force majeure find themselves in a difficult financial situation. Such financial support is provided to about 100 000 students/year.

Accommodation / lodging assistance. Providing accommodation is a substantial form of assistance for students from outside the city. The head of the school or academic centre can dismiss student of all or some charges due to the difficult financial situation. Almost 120 000 students uses the accomodation in bourses and university lodgings.

The government programme of equal opportunities for pupils „student’s equipment” (wyprawka szkolna) is aimed at reducing poverty limitations at the beginning of school career. It consists of providing new pupils with course books, manuals and other equipment free of charge. Every year about 133 pupils are covered by the programme.

Motivational support, aimed at supporting students with excellent academic potential are:

- Scholarships for learning results, awarded by the head of the school – 35 000 students/year
- Scholarship from Prime Minister for students with excellent skills and potential. It can be granted yearly to 1 student from a given school. It enables passing one’s final exams. It is granted to 5 800 students/year.
- Scholarship from Ministry of Education is given to the finalists of international or national competitions, tournaments etc. every year to about 300 students

- Scholarship from Ministry of Culture can be granted to a student of art school. Every year it is awarded to about 70 students.

More than 217 000 people, including 179 000 pupils and 38 000 students of higher education institutions have used so far the scholarships within the measure 2.2. "*Providing equal opportunities in education through scholarships*" of the Integrated Programme of the European Regional Development Fund.

The scholarship is granted for the learning period of a given school/adademic year, but no longer than 10 months. It is granted in material form (for example funding coursebooks for students, funding accommodation, meals, etc. ) or in the form of refunding learning expenses (for example course books and dictionaries for secondary schools and higher education units, higher education payments, in the system of daily, weekly, evening studies and individual course of studies.)

Financial assistance for students includes different scholarships and subventions.

Another form of assistance for higher education students only are student credits, introduced in 1998 as a means of widening access to higher education. Student credits are provided by commercial banks with the partly funding of interest from the State budget.

In 2006 two new state programmes promoting euqal access to education are launched:

1. Support of development and implementation of regional and local programmes promoting equal access to education of children and young people (2006), „*Activation and support of local authority units aiming at financial educational assistance*”. The goals of the programme

are diminishing poverty, prevention of indifference and passivity, and promotion of active civic attitudes.

2. Programme of promoting equal educational opportunities for students from the families of the former state-owned agricultural enterprises (PGR) for years 2006-2008. The programme covers the children of secondary schools, enabling them to pass their final exam. In 2005 the programme covered as much as 48 000 students. In 2006 their number is to be the same.

The assistance can be aimed at funding:

- 1) meals;
- 2) accommodation;
- 3) transport to school;
- 4) course books and materials;
- 5) necessary clothes and shoes;
- 6) per diem;
- 7) other expenses on education, such as:
  - a) language learning and other additional courses,
  - b) membership in students' clubs and learning associations,
  - c) school trips

Many actions providing equal opportunities for children and young people are organized by NGOs, i.e. in the scope of tasks commissioned by the state administration to the units from outside the public funding sector. In 2005 NGOs organized summer holidays for as much as 15 000 children and young people.

To prepare young people to the labour market projects were launched promoting different forms of professional activity to increase employability, including self-employment and learning entrepreneurship skills.

In 2005 20 summer language holiday courses were organized.

Educational resort, aiming at providing equal opportunities for children and young people, launches projects resulting from international cooperation of children and young people. In 2005 85 such projects were launched, in which participated more than 13 000 people from Poland and other countries.

Project „Young people” covers all actions providing equal opportunities in the field of education, life, career for young people, especially those that pay attention to their activity, international cooperation and voluntary work. It is often the only way for young people from rural communities to organize a project for themselves and their peers. Stress is also laid on projects implemented for the benefit of local community.