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## **The “MATCH” project – cooperation between universities, local government and business for the development of entrepreneurship and creativity in Lublin – part one (overview of co-operation)**

### **Projekt „MATCH” czyli współpraca uczelni wyższych, samorządu i biznesu dla rozwoju przedsiębiorczości i kreatywności w Lublinie – część pierwsza przegląd współpracy**

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#### **Abstract**

The cooperation between universities and the socio-economic environment (SEE) should be based on synergy that generates benefits for all parties involved. Effective university-SEE cooperation links various sectors and represents an ambitious and significant challenge for each side.

The aim of this first (overview of co-operation) article is to characterize and analyse the cooperation between universities (emphasis on practice-oriented) and the SEE in the context of the intersection of mutual collaboration and the analysis of benefits. The article discusses the legal foundations of cooperation, strategic documents (City of Lublin, UMCS and WSPA in Lublin), and main areas of cooperation between universities and the SEE. The second (practical) article will contain a description of the “MATCH” project –initiative involving cooperation between local government, business, and universities.

**Keywords:** cooperation, university, business, education, socio-economic environment, partners, local government

### Streszczenie

Współpraca uczelni z otoczeniem społeczno-gospodarczym (OSG) powinna opierać się na synergii, która generować obustronne korzyści. Efektywna współpraca uczelni z OSG stanowi powiązanie różnych środowisk i jest ogromnym, a także ambitnym wyzwaniem dla każdej ze stron.

Celem pierwszego artykułu (teoretycznego) jest dokonanie charakterystyki i analizy współpracy uczelni (z naciskiem na uczelnie o profilu praktycznym) i OSG w kontekście przecięcia się pól wzajemnej współpracy i analizie korzyści dla każdej ze stron. W artykule omówiono podstawy prawne dotyczące współpracy, dokumenty strategiczne (Miasto Lublin, UMCS oraz WSPA w Lublinie) oraz główne obszary współpracy pomiędzy uczelniami i OSG. Drugi artykuł (praktyczny) będzie zawierać opis projektu „MATCH” – unikatowego w skali Polski przedsięwzięcia współpracy na linii samorząd–biznes–uczelnie wyższe.

**Słowa kluczowe:** współpraca, uczelnie, biznes, edukacja, otoczenie społeczno-gospodarcze, partnerzy, samorząd

## Introduction

Cooperation between universities and their socio-economic environment should be based on synergy that generates benefits for all parties involved. The relationships that exist between higher education institutions, local governments, and businesses are often referred to as the triple helix model, within which entities cooperate, interact, influence one another, and coexist, with their interests becoming increasingly intertwined.

The aim of this first (theoretical) article is to characterize and analyse the cooperation between universities (with an emphasis on practice-oriented universities) and the socio-economic environment (business and local government) in the context of intersecting areas of mutual collaboration and the benefits for each party. The article discusses the legal foundations of such cooperation, strategic documents (of the City of Lublin, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, and the University College of Enterprise and Administration in Lublin), as well as the main areas of cooperation between universities and the socio-economic environment. The second article (practical part) will describe the “MATCH” project – a unique collaboration initiative between local government, business, and universities, on a national scale.

## Cooperation between universities and the socio-economic environment – introduction

According to the Act of July 20, 2018 – Law on Higher Education and Science, a higher education institution in the Republic of Poland may offer degree programs

with an academic or practical profile. Paragraph 64, section 2, item 1 of the Act specifies that "degree programs are conducted with a practical profile when more than half of the ECTS credits are allocated to courses developing practical skills" (Act of July 20, 2018 – Law on Higher Education and Science). The implementation of educational programs through practical activities such as exercises, workshops, laboratories, and project classes distinguishes practice-oriented universities from academic ones, where curricula place more emphasis on courses related to the institution's academic research. Possessing the status of a practice-oriented university allows for the design and implementation of educational programs in close cooperation with the socio-economic environment.

This cooperation between university and its surrounding should be based on synergy that brings tangible benefits to all involved. At this point, it is essential to clearly define what is meant by the "socio-economic environment" – that is, all stakeholders potentially interested in participating in academic life, either directly or indirectly. University partners are sometimes referred to as "technology partners". According to the theory proposed by Makary Krzysztof Stasiak, Rector of the University College of Enterprise and Administration in Lublin from 2021 to 2023, a technology partner is an external entity involved in the education process that shares technology – meaning the tools and solutions used in its own operations and aligned with current market trends and the university's profile. This "technology" may include, for example, software used in daily work that gives students and graduates a competitive edge in the labour market; a teaching methodology employed by a practitioner-lecturer who introduces something entirely new to the university; or a new learning module that directly responds to labour market needs. Occasionally, the collaboration between a university and its partner leads to the development of new technology – where students, guided by practitioner-lecturers, co-create innovative solutions that address a business need and are later implemented by the company (from the speech of WSPA Rector – Makary Stasiak, PhD, during official inauguration of new Academic Year in the University College of Enterprise and Administration in Lublin, January 15<sup>th</sup> 2021). A good example of this process includes bachelor's, engineering, or master's theses written "on request" from external stakeholders, addressing real-world challenges faced by entrepreneurs. University-partner cooperation, therefore, can and often does produce a "synergy effect" that benefits all parties.

The modern, globalized world faces vast and complex challenges related to civilizational and technological progress, which should be accompanied by an effective transfer of innovative and creative solutions from universities and research centres to the business world. Higher education institutions are sources of knowledge, competencies, and future workforce. Their traditional roles as research and educational centres are now complemented by public engagement, where universities are expected to contribute to solving societal challenges (Bryła, 2014). It should be noted that effective cooperation between higher education institutions and the socio-economic environment connects various sectors that differ in organizational culture, values,

and mission, and poses a major challenge for all parties involved. A characteristic feature of today's world is that the transfer of knowledge and innovation works in both directions – businesses, striving for competitiveness, seek and introduce cutting-edge solutions, often through their own laboratories, much like universities used to do. While academic universities produce science in their laboratories and transfer it to the external environment, practice-oriented universities do the reverse: they absorb knowledge and technology from the socio-economic environment and implement it in student education, ensuring the knowledge is up-to-date. This, in turn, enhances the employment prospects of their graduates. This cooperation also benefits the external environment, as it allows employers to recruit students and graduates during internships who are well-prepared to undertake professional tasks within the company structure.

This article offers a brief overview and summary of cooperation between practice-oriented higher education institutions and business and local government (in other words: universities and their socio-economic environment – SEE). It analyses legal provisions that define the framework of this cooperation – both at the national level (statutory regulations) and through strategic documents of the institutions covered in the article: *Lublin 2030 Strategy*, *The Development Strategy of the University College of Enterprise and Administration in Lublin*, and *Maria Curie-Skłodowska University's Strategy*. The article also outlines key areas of cooperation between universities and their external environment.

## **Cooperation between higher education institutions and the socio-economic environment in light of legislation and strategic documents**

### **Cooperation of university with socio-economic environment – institutional perspective**

The issue of cooperation between higher education institutions and the socio-economic environment is of key importance in a digitized and globalized world. Numerous international examples of such collaboration show that it contributes not only to the development of universities and external stakeholders, but also positively impacts local communities, regions, countries, and even international structures and local governments (Kozień, 2021). In the Polish legal system, as defined in the currently binding *Law on Higher Education and Science*, cooperation with the socio-economic environment is not treated holistically – it is addressed rather marginally (Kozień, 2021). This body of law belongs to the domain of administrative law, while the external stakeholders of universities can be either public or private entities. Therefore, the socio-economic environment exists “at the intersection” of administrative and civil law, which may lead to certain challenges in university–stakeholder cooperation (Kozień, 2021).

It is important to note that university–environment cooperation is enshrined in one of the key principles of the functioning of higher education in Poland, stated in the preamble to the Law on Higher Education and Science: “[...] universities and other research institutions fulfil a mission of particular significance for the state and the nation: they make a crucial contribution to economic innovation, contribute to the development of culture, and co-shape the moral standards governing public life” (Act of July 20, 2018 – Law on Higher Education and Science). As stipulated in Article 61(1) of the Act: “A university may conduct studies in cooperation with a professional licensing body, an examination body involved in the certification of professional qualifications, a professional self-government body, a business organization, or a registration authority. The principles of cooperation shall be defined in a written agreement [...], which may specify the partner’s involvement in the development of the curriculum and the method of implementing professional internships” (Act of July 20, 2018 – Law on Higher Education and Science). Another relevant provision relates to the evaluation of educational quality conducted by the Polish Accreditation Committee (PKA). According to Article 242(2) point 4, when conducting program evaluations, the PKA considers “cooperation with the socio-economic environment” – this is evaluated under Criterion 6: “Cooperation with the socio-economic environment in the development, implementation, and improvement of the study program and its impact on the development of the field of study” (Annex No. 1 to the Statute of the PKA).

Naturally, cooperation between universities and the socio-economic environment is not limited to participation in curriculum development or the implementation of student internships as required by the educational program. The legislature defined only a minimum standard in this regard – one that universities can shape and expand based on their development strategy, educational vision, and the expectations of the local socio-economic environment. Such cooperation goes beyond national legal frameworks – it also includes regional and local development strategies, as well as the statutes and strategic documents of individual higher education institutions.

### **University – business – local government cooperation in the context of the Lublin 2030 Strategy**

The *Lublin 2030 Strategy* is “a kind of signpost – a documented vision for Lublin” (*Strategia Lublin 2030*, 2022). This signpost focuses on five key development areas: 1) Creative, academic, and entrepreneurial Lublin; 2) Green and spatially sustainable Lublin; 3) Open, intergenerational, and socially engaged Lublin; 4) Creative, active, and hospitable Lublin; 5) Metropolitan Lublin. It is worth emphasizing the importance that the city places on academia, entrepreneurship, and creativity by listing this area first in the Strategy. According to the document, Lublin’s academic identity is a well-recognized brand, and strengthening it further requires enhancing the city’s potential as an international centre of education and research. It also calls for the full realization of the university’s “third mission” – that is, collaboration with the social and economic environment – and for even more proactive involvement

of local government in this area (*Strategia Lublin 2030*, 2022). The presence of universities in Lublin is considered a key developmental factor. The academic sector generates productive and attractive job opportunities and creates broad, city-forming impulses such as intellectual capital and the education of highly qualified professionals for both the economy and society. Since 2011, the City of Lublin has been running a program in collaboration with all local universities to develop an international educational offering and attract international students. One of the key goals outlined in the first development area of the Strategy is “**Goal A.3. Synergy between the city and its universities**”, whose assumptions are summarized in the following table.

Tab.1. Elements of the Lublin 2030 Strategy related to university cooperation

<b>Goal: Synergy between the city and universities</b>	
Background:	In Lublin, the process of building strong connections between the city, universities, business, and residents began after 2010 as part of the previous city development strategy. Today, Lublin is perceived nationally as a leading centre of multidimensional stakeholder interactions. The local government skilfully initiates, coordinates, and manages numerous projects aligned with the quadruple helix model. This condition must be maintained and strengthened through intelligent institutionalization and the development of new cooperation networks between the city and universities, as well as enhanced university support in establishing relations with business and local stakeholders. Cooperation must be business-oriented, increasing the competitiveness of local enterprises through the facilitation of innovation commercialization from universities and the flexible creation of new study programs, practical courses, and the effective use of internship and placement systems.
Actions towards realizing the goal:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Developing “Academic Lublin” – engaged and responsive to the needs of local and metropolitan residents.</li> <li>2. Creating flexible study programs aligned with the smart specializations of the city and the Lublin metropolitan area.</li> <li>3. Implementing a new model for effective commercialization of research conducted at Lublin universities.</li> <li>4. Joint efforts by the city, universities, and business to attract prestigious research projects to Lublin.</li> <li>5. Expanding sports education in Lublin and its universities to integrate various communities.</li> <li>6. Strengthening student culture by developing non-commercial and co-created student initiatives.</li> <li>7. Consistent promotion of Lublin as an academic centre (for students and researchers).</li> </ol>
Key tasks and projects	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Creation of a <b>Science and Experiment Centre in Lublin</b> – a facility promoting science, creativity, and innovation with regional and supra-regional outreach, to be operated in cooperation with the regional government, universities, schools, and business partners.</li> <li>2. Development and promotion of the <b>Lublin Science Festival</b>.</li> <li>3. Implementation of the “<b>Academic Lublin</b>” program supporting university initiatives for the benefit of city residents, institutions, NGOs, and businesses in Lublin.</li> <li>4. Joint initiatives of the city, universities, and business to create new, future-oriented study programs aligned with the smart specializations of the city and metropolitan area, and their regular evaluation and updating.</li> </ol>

Goal: Synergy between the city and universities	
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Involvement of a greater number of business practitioners in teaching in areas linked to the city's smart specializations, and recruitment of foreign experts and practitioners to teach in Lublin.</li> <li>6. Launch and international promotion of the <b>"Spin-off in Lublin"</b> program.</li> <li>7. Joint efforts of universities and local government to encourage scientists/innovators to establish spin-off companies at Lublin universities, and to attract business angels and venture capital to invest in these startups.</li> <li>8. Inclusion of Lublin-based scientists in expert and advisory bodies working with the Lublin City Hall, its institutions, and municipal companies.</li> <li>9. Introduction of the course <b>"Project Management and Entrepreneurship"</b> as a mandatory workshop-style subject across all fields of study in Lublin.</li> <li>10. Development of a <b>joint internship and placement program</b>, in cooperation with university Career Offices and using the business network of the Lublin local government ("MATCH" project).</li> <li>11. Expansion of <b>scholarship programs</b> for outstanding students and PhD candidates from Lublin universities, and organization of the <b>Mayor of Lublin's Award</b> for the best thesis focused on the city's economic development.</li> <li>12. Implementation of <b>industry-specific and commissioned PhD programs</b> for the local government of Lublin and for priority economic sectors in the city.</li> <li>13. Establishment of a <b>research and implementation center for artificial intelligence</b> in Lublin, in cooperation with local universities and the national administration.</li> </ol>
Recommendations and synergies	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The synergy between the city and universities largely depends on university–business cooperation. In this context, it is important to carry out projects that inspire students, PhD candidates, alumni, and researchers to engage in entrepreneurship. These programs should emerge at the intersection of the <b>Lublin Science and Technology Park</b> (an institution of the regional government) and academic knowledge transfer centres, business incubators, startup platforms, local authorities, business organizations, and business itself.</li> <li>2. One promising source of synergy between universities and local government could be the <b>use of research and development infrastructure</b> at Lublin universities to implement the Lublin 2030 Strategy.</li> <li>3. The transfer of knowledge from universities to business also requires adequate <b>municipal infrastructure</b>—including business infrastructure and broadly defined quality-of-life infrastructure (e.g., co-working spaces, innovation labs, inspiring public spaces, or green areas).</li> <li>4. Universities and local secondary schools should be more closely connected through alumni programs and other forms of collaboration, engaging both business and local government.</li> <li>5. A truly academic Lublin means creating relationships, solutions, and initiatives <b>by universities for the city's residents</b>. These solutions should improve residents' lives, enhance public spaces, and optimize business processes.</li> <li>6. A model synergy between the city and its universities is also one in which <b>graduates choose to stay in Lublin</b> to fulfil their personal and professional aspirations.</li> </ol>

Source: own compilation based on Lublin 2030 Strategy, n.d., pp. 106–110.



## Analysis of the Strategy of the University College of Enterprise and Administration in Lublin (2021–2026) in the context of cooperation with the socio-economic environment

The University College of Enterprise and Administration in Lublin (WSPA) is the oldest non-public higher education institution in Lublin – it was established in 1998 (registered under entry no. 144 in the register of non-public universities). From the very beginning, the university has placed strong emphasis on close cooperation with the socio-economic environment, particularly in shaping and implementing curricula tailored to labor market needs, and on continuously adapting them to current market trends (Sitko, Mieszajkina, 2012). The key document outlining the university's development directions is the WSPA Strategy for 2021–2026 (*Strategia WSPA 2021–2026*, 2021). Already in the “WSPA Vision” section, a strong link between the university's activities and the business environment can be seen. As stated in the document: “As a result of the multi-layered transfer of competencies to the environment, the University College of Enterprise and Administration in Lublin aims to become a leader in higher education by shaping entrepreneurial, creative, and active individuals, engaged in all areas of life and distinguished by an above-average understanding of phenomena occurring in their surroundings” (*Strategia WSPA 2021–2026*, 2021). This statement clearly shows the university's ambition to educate graduates who possess knowledge, skills, and competencies that are valuable to employers and capable of bringing real added value to the organizations where they find employment. Among the university's core values that directly relate to the labour market and the socio-economic environment are practical education and the development of labour market-relevant skills. The strategy emphasizes cooperation with the socio-economic environment, which is reflected in the strategic goals set for 2021–2026.

Tab. 2. Strategic Goals of WSPA (2021–2026) related to the socio-economic environment

Strategic goal (SG)	Description
SG 1	Development of the university's educational offering by introducing new study programs, specializations created in cooperation with the socio-economic environment, and expansion of specialist training
SG 10	Broadening and strengthening WSPA's cooperation with partners from the socio-economic environment, including local government and other public institutions, through internships, placements, volunteering, study visits, project-based and thesis assignments, and involving external partners in teaching and learning outcomes assessment.
SG 11	Expansion of postgraduate and training course offerings [...] Preparing study programs tailored for businesses based on educational needs assessments.



Strategic goal (SG)	Description
SG 12	Continued operation of the Career Services Office as a centre that supports students' professional entry into the labour market and complements the educational offering through programs aligned with regional socio-economic needs.
SG 13	Development and enhancement of university infrastructure [...] Acquisition of new facilities and equipment through cooperation with external partners for the benefit of faculty and students (e.g., dormitories, labs, specialist classrooms, spaces for cultural and social activities).

Source: own compilation based on the *Strategia WSPA 2021–2026*, 2021.

This analysis of WSPA's strategic goals clearly demonstrates that the university's approach to cooperation with the socio-economic environment is multidimensional and multifaceted, going well beyond the traditional forms of university – external environment collaboration defined by legislation, and expanding the scope of possible actions into new areas.

### **Analysis of the strategy of Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin in the context of cooperation with the socio-economic environment**

Maria Curie-Skłodowska University (UMCS) is the second-oldest university in Lublin (established in 1944) and currently the institution with the largest number of students among all universities in the city. The currently binding UMCS Strategy for 2019–2025 (*Strategia Rozwoju Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej w Lublinie w latach 2019–2025*), adopted on March 27, 2019, includes numerous references to cooperation with the socio-economic environment, despite the fact that the university has an academic profile. In the introduction, the Strategy emphasizes that the university's priority areas of activity include scientific research, doctoral education, and support for the scientific development of early-career researchers. The results of the research conducted by the university's academic staff are intended to serve a wide range of beneficiaries, and the findings are to be transferred to the socio-economic environment, contributing to the development of the city, the region, and the country. The Strategy defines five key conditions for the university's development (institutional and legal, related to research, related to education, related to the economic environment, and internal), in which we find direct references to cooperation with the socio-economic environment.

Tab. 3. Strategic Conditions of UMCS Related to Cooperation with the Socio-Economic Environment

Type of condition	Challenges identified
Related to research activity	– The growing importance of collaboration between academia and the socio-economic environment.
Related to economic environment	– Limited use of research results by the economic environment. – Incomplete utilization of Lublin's potential as a place to study and work. – Increasing employer expectations and practical labour market demands regarding graduate competencies. – Rapid labour market changes that hinder the planning of future program offerings.

Source: own compilation based on *Strategia Rozwoju Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej w Lublinie w latach 2019–2025*, 2019: 4–5.

The university's mission and vision statements also position UMCS as an institution maintaining strong connections with domestic and international partners in the context of conducting research relevant to both scientific and economic development. UMCS aims to ensure that its diplomas guarantee a high quality of education and are highly valued by employers. The university also aspires to be a key contributor to the social and economic development of the Lublin region. The socio-economic environment is also the focus of Strategic Goal III – Enhancing the Role of the University in Shaping the Socio-Economic Development of Lublin and the Lublin Region. Among the most important operational goals under this strategic objective are:

1. **Operational Goal 1:** Active participation of the University in the development and implementation of regional and municipal development strategies, and increased engagement of the academic community in shaping national and local socio-economic policy;
2. **Operational Goal 5:** Strengthening the prestige and brand of UMCS as a partner within the socio-economic environment and deepening this cooperation;
3. **Operational Goal 7:** Building a system for gathering feedback from potential partners and clients on labour market needs, study program offerings, and expectations for academic and teaching staff.

According to the Strategy, these objectives will be implemented through the following operational tasks:

1. Development of principles for involving UMCS staff in the preparation of regional and local strategic documents.
2. Promotional activities targeted at the socio-economic environment, positioning UMCS as a desirable and credible partner, and increasing brand awareness.
3. Creation and implementation of a system for collecting information on potential partners and clients, as well as data on labour market needs and preferred study programs. The collected insights will be used to develop both

research and educational offerings (*Strategia Rozwoju Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej w Lublinie w latach 2019–2025*, 2019).

### **Key areas of cooperation between higher education institutions, the business sector, and local government**

Cooperation between higher education institutions, the business sector, and local government is not only desirable but essential in the face of dynamic labour market changes and increasing employer expectations. The synergy that emerges from such cooperation creates numerous opportunities for all parties involved—ranging from better-prepared graduates with up-to-date, in-demand skills, to institutional and economic development, and the emergence of innovation in the economy. The key to success in this cooperation is engagement, open and honest communication, and the pursuit of mutual benefits, based on equal partnership in which no single party dominates. This creates the foundation for lasting and strong ties between academia, business, and government.

Below are the main benefits for universities and the academic world arising from cooperation with the socio-economic environment (*note: the following classification was developed by the author based on observations made during professional work and service as Chancellor of WSPA. It is not an exhaustive list, but highlights the most practically significant benefits from the university's perspective*).

1. **Scientific and Research Benefits:** Collaboration expands the scope of research, enhances the scientific staff's research competencies, and increases the scale and standards of scientific studies (Ziontek, 2015). It also encourages the exchange of ideas and promotes joint conferences, seminars, symposia, and discussion panels.
2. **Didactic Benefits:** It enriches curricula in practice-oriented programs with cutting-edge knowledge, allowing students to acquire up-to-date and labor market-relevant skills with a clear practical dimension.
3. **Organizational Benefits:** Universities, as organizations, develop unique cultures shaped by the coexistence of staff: academic lecturers working full-time as teachers (teaching as their main field) and so called "new academics" – business professionals from different fields and branches, who share their experience with students and other teachers. This coexistence fosters a new organizational culture, openness to nonstandard solutions, and introduces certain logistical challenges (e.g., scheduling), but ultimately serves the primary stakeholders – students.
4. **Human Resource Benefits:** By employing practitioner-lecturers from business, the university gains access to a social capital that ensures curricula are aligned with labour market expectations.
5. **Pragmatic Benefits:** Expanding the network of university partners increases access to high-quality internship placements – a core value for practice-oriented institutions.

As mentioned above, cooperation should bring benefits to all cooperating parties. Benefits for the socio-economic environment – business and local government – are as following:

1. **Developmental Benefits:** Implementation of innovative solutions and access to cutting-edge knowledge may significantly enhance a company's competitive advantage. Bachelor's or master's theses developed "on demand" often bring fresh, out-of-the-box perspectives to real-world problems. Students go beyond the scheme, propose solutions that would be difficult or even impossible to develop while being inside the organization.
2. **Economic Benefits:** cooperation, thanks to implementing innovative solutions, can lead to improved operational efficiency and cost reductions. Internships may also serve as a cost-effective recruitment mechanism and help to minimize hiring new employees, as well as is a great opportunity to prepare future employee to fulfilling professional duties or even be a part of employee onboarding.
3. **Human Resource Benefits:** Just as university lecturers come from the business world, business professionals become engaged with academia. This creates direct contact with students, facilitating talent scouting for internships or future employment.
4. **Social Capital Benefits:** Business employees who teach gain new competencies and build new networks within academic environments, creating benefits both at the individual and organizational levels – increase of employee competencies is an added value for entire organization.
5. **Prestige Benefits:** For most companies and organizations, collaborating with a university is a mark of distinction and prestige. It also strengthens their market position and can serve as a tool for attracting investors or clients.

### **Key areas of cooperation between higher education institutions, business sector and local government**

The main goals of socio-economic environment, who decide to collaborate with the higher education sector include:

1. **Raising the qualifications of current employees;**
2. **Recruiting and educating new employees** in accordance with the needs of the business entity or local government;
3. **Contributing to changes in education**, for example by introducing new modules or specializations that respond to real labour market needs;
4. **Building a positive public image (PR)** among current and prospective employees, as well as among clients (Bryła, 2014);
5. **Gaining a competitive advantage** on the market.

In the following sections, the most common areas and forms of cooperation between universities and the socio-economic environment will be discussed.

## Student internships

Cooperation between universities and the socio-economic environment in the area of student internships is the first and most fundamental form of collaboration. According to the Act on Higher Education and Science, professional internships are an integral part of the curriculum, constitute its practical complement, and are an inseparable element of the educational process. The university senate is responsible for determining the duration of internships, while taking into account the need to ensure high-quality education and to enable the achievement of learning outcomes specified in the study program (Act of July 20, 2018 – Law on Higher Education and Science).

Moreover, in the case of programs with a practical profile, the curriculum should provide for professional internships lasting at least 6 months in the case of first-cycle studies and long-cycle master's studies, as well as at least 3 months for second-cycle studies (Act, 2018). Interestingly, universities may also recognize as internships the activities performed by a student as part of employment, an internship, or volunteer work, provided that these activities allowed the student to achieve the learning outcomes defined in the study program for professional internships (Act of July 20, 2018 – Law on Higher Education and Science).

The implementation of the internship program usually takes place based on a previously signed cooperation agreement between the university and the institution/company, which defines the scope of mutual cooperation; however, this is not a formal requirement. In practice, internships are often also carried out in institutions that do not have a formal cooperation agreement in this regard – for example, in a situation where a student proposes an internship location independently, one that the university has not previously cooperated with, and this choice stems from the student's interests and is, in principle, consistent with the curriculum they are pursuing. The university has the autonomy to determine the number of internship hours, and the senate approves this scope. To provide an example from the University College of Enterprise and Administration in Lublin, the number of hours required for internships in first-cycle studies is 720 hours, which constitutes approximately 30% of the study program. 720 hours divided across working days, assuming one working day equals 8 hours, gives 90 working days. Assuming that there are 20 working days in a month, internships are completed over 4.5 months, which in its duration exceeds the standard length of a probationary employment contract, which is usually signed for a period of 3 months. This means that over the course of 4.5 months, an employer has ample time to get to know the student, assess their potential and engagement, and verify the possibility of further cooperation in the form of a professional internship, employment contract, or a civil-law agreement. Among the benefits of undertaking an internship for the student, it is worth mentioning first and foremost the fact that it is an excellent opportunity to apply theory in practice, confront the realities of the job market, and become acquainted with the duties they will per-

form in the future as an employee. The student becomes familiar with the specifics of the company, its organizational structure, market position, and industry. Often, professional internships are also the first professional experience for students, where they learn what a job is and what it involves – of course, in a simplified form (it is important to remember that a student is not free labour to be “used” by the employer). Internships carried out inconsistently with the curriculum and the ethos of a higher education institution can unfortunately also lead to certain pathologies, among which the following can be listed: an uninspiring and undiversified internship program – unfortunately, there are still (though increasingly rare) situations, usually occurring in companies unaware of the value and potential of well-planned internships, in which the student is treated as a tool for performing simple, mundane tasks such as making coffee, photocopying documents, or acting as a messenger.

In this context, the importance of proper cooperation between the university and the internship provider cannot be overestimated, nor can the importance of properly preparing the entire process in a way that brings synergistic benefits to all parties involved – for the student: the acquisition of practical skills, for the employer: the opportunity to identify and recruit talented individuals, and for the university: long-term, stable cooperation with a specific enterprise or institution.

### **Study visits**

Study visits are another valuable way to familiarize students with their future work environment. Unlike internships, which are a longer form of engagement for both the student and the employer, a study visit is a short, usually one or two-day form, in which a group of students has the opportunity to visit an organization/institution at its headquarters in order to get to know it better, understand how it works, get to know the catalogue of products/services offered, listen to success stories, ask questions to owners, employees, obtain information on employment criteria, requirements for candidates or additional skills that are useful in the industry or are an additional asset in the recruitment process. For a company/institution, it is an opportunity to present its potential, technical innovations used, for example, in the production process or provide additional attractions during the visit – e.g. allowing students to take on the role of an employee for a moment in order to perform a specific professional task. A study visit, if carried out in another location or even in another country, may also include a tourist element that broadens horizons and world-views and allows for the acquisition of new skills. At this point, a success story can be presented – the example of students of International Relations at the University College of Enterprise and Administration in Lublin, who between May 17–19, 2022 took part in a study visit to the European Parliament, during which they: participated in a city game regarding European institutions, took part in an architectural walk to get to know the most important monuments of the capital of Belgium, took a trip to Bruges and a tour of Brussels – combined with a visit to historical places, visited the European Parliament (Palace of Justice), where they met with the then MEP

Krzysztof Hetman and had the opportunity to take part in a plenary session. The visit was an excellent complement to the program of the International Relations course, especially to teaching modules on the European Union. It should also be mentioned here that the visit was financed from European Union funds under the Operational Program Knowledge Education Development – the project “WSPA-niała przyszłości – zintegrowany program rozwoju uczelni” implemented by WSPA in Lublin.

### **Diploma theses prepared “on demand”**

Preparation of diploma theses (bachelor’s, engineering, master’s) on topics that fall within the sphere of interest of employers/institutions or are directly related to their activities is one form of cooperation that has become increasingly popular in recent years. One of the more interesting practices from the market, worth noting, is the practice of the Lublin City Hall, which on its website (*Proponowane tematy prac dyplomowych*, n.d.) publishes a database of proposed diploma thesis topics that address issues broadly related to the development of Lublin. As we read on the Lublin City Hall website: “Students who decide to undertake the selected topics may count on cooperation from the Lublin City Hall in terms of providing data necessary to create the diploma thesis. In addition, topics devoted to the economic development of the city of Lublin are eligible to participate in the Mayor of Lublin’s competition for the best diploma thesis.” As we can see in the analyzed case, the list of proposed thesis topics contains 144 entries from various fields, including, among others: social issues, spatial economy, architecture and construction, transport, local government, economics and administration, IT, marketing and promotion, education, sociology, tourism for people with disabilities, security, geodesy, etc. Theses on the proposed topics can constitute a significant added value for the challenges faced by the Lublin City Hall (in the context of the discussed case) or more broadly – the challenges faced by entrepreneurs. Students, with their fresh external perspective, often thinking outside the box, are able to generate ideas or solutions that may represent a significant added value for the employer. Of course, writing diploma theses on demand is not a one-sided ideal solution – among the skeptical voices regarding this solution, opinions appear suggesting that the solutions proposed by students may be difficult or even impossible to implement due to superficial knowledge of the subject or the time required to implement the idea. Nevertheless, this type of cooperation is undoubtedly very valuable for each of the parties involved, offering students the opportunity to come into contact with economic reality and gain practical experience.

### **Consultation and development of study programmes with the socio-economic environment (including postgraduate programmes)**

The practice of consulting study programs with the socio-economic environment is an immanent feature of practice-oriented universities, which have close, practical cooperation with business in their DNA. Due to the dynamic development of the world,



the emergence of new challenges that enterprises must face, as well as the constant development of technology, the university must continually modify its programs so that they respond to current global challenges and meet the needs of the local, regional, and global labour market. The involvement of employers in the preparation of educational content is a guarantee of providing up-to-date knowledge and skills desired on the labour market. What do these consultations involve? They may take place on several planes/levels:

1. Individual consultation of the entire program or specialization with a specific employer – a person responsible on behalf of the university for the study program (Dean, Program Coordinator, etc.) sends the program to the employer or meets with them directly in order to discuss the currency of the program from the perspective of the company.
2. Establishment of a program council (the name of the body responsible for consulting the study program depends on the specific university and may vary. As a rule, however, the purpose of this body is to issue an opinion on a given study program and make recommendations) for a specific field of study – the council includes representatives of the socio-economic environment (companies, institutions) relevant to the field in order to issue an opinion on its currency, usefulness from the employer's point of view, and to develop recommendations regarding proposed changes to the program (e.g., adding a new specialization that will be useful in light of current trends in the industry or removing certain content that is currently outdated).
3. Establishment of a university development council/expert council (similarly to the program council, the name may vary depending on the university) – unlike the program council, which focuses on a specific field/program of study, the development council is a body that provides general recommendations concerning the overall development directions of the university as a whole, outlining strategic directions for development from the perspective of changes occurring throughout the socio-economic environment, not only within a single industry/sector.

When discussing consultations and joint development of study programs with the socio-economic environment, one should bear in mind that a common practice used by practice-oriented universities is the creation of “specializations on demand” of a specific company or industry, due to the dynamic development of a given sector, growth prospects, and demand for specialists in a particular area. Good practices in this regard include the first-cycle engineering study program – ‘Interior Design’, offered by the University College of Enterprise and Administration in Lublin since the 2020/2021 academic year. This program was developed at the initiative of the Lublin City Economic Council and the company IKEA. The study program was created based on suggestions from the university's socio-economic environment. Interestingly, thanks to the approach used in both the development and implementation of the study

program, the field received the highest rating during the Polish Accreditation Committee's site visit in 2024 – all 10 program evaluation criteria were found to be fully met, and the program received accreditation for the maximum period of 6 years.

### **Organization of events – scientific and thematic conferences, seminars, debates**

Higher education institutions have always been places of exchange of thoughts, ideas, and viewpoints, and they have provided – and continue to provide – a space for presenting the latest scientific achievements. However, they do not create science for its own sake – the results of conducted research, developed inventions, and patents are only as valuable as their potential for social usefulness beyond the university walls. For this purpose, universities organize scientific events – conferences, seminars, and debates that may be interesting and useful from the perspective of the socio-economic environment. During such events, the results of the latest research and scientific discoveries are presented, short monographic lectures are held, and discussions take place on specific topics. The joint organization of events by universities and the socio-economic environment aims to bring the “world of theory” closer to the “world of practice.” Frequently, during this type of event, theory is interwoven with practice around a specific issue. For example – the conference “Accessibility Roadmap. Unobvious needs in the world of young people,” which took place at the headquarters of WSPA in Lublin on November 21, 2024, in its program combined a series of theoretically oriented presentations with presentations of good practices and experiences originating directly from the market. This expert event was organized by a higher education institution (WSPA in Lublin) together with partners from the socio-economic environment with whom the university has signed cooperation agreements – the Forum of Lublin Non-Governmental Organizations (FLOP), the Lublin Partnership for Accessibility, and the State Fund for the Rehabilitation of Disabled Persons. The event was co-financed by the Polish State Fund for the Rehabilitation of Disabled Persons (PFRON) – so there was also a component of co-financing of the event. The conference program and its structure excellently reflected the idea of university–environment partnership. The subject matter revolved around the needs of people with disabilities, and the topics of the presentations included both theoretical papers – such as a discussion of the key provisions of the Act of July 19, 2019, on ensuring accessibility for persons with special needs – and topics based on conducted research, addressing “real-life” problems – such as depression in young people. The mutual synergy of sectors and cooperation in organizing events that allow the confrontation of theory and practice is a great added value that stimulates development and constitutes an impetus for further, in-depth cooperation.

### **Recruitment of lecturers from the socio-economic environment**

Conducting classes by individuals coming from the business environment is an increasingly common practice used by universities, which, in the case of practice-oriented

universities, is essentially their immanent feature. Lecturers recruited from among specialists from the socio-economic environment are implementers of technologies and solutions that are created in the companies they come from. They bring new quality into the study programs – they “bring” to the classes knowledge that is tested, proven, and verified in professional conditions, as well as skills developed in professional practice. Based on observations of the implementation of study programs at a practice-oriented higher education institution, the following forms of involvement of representatives of the university’s business environment in the teaching process can be distinguished:

1. Implementation of a specific course within a specific study program in a given field of study based on an approved syllabus (in this case, the representative of the environment is not the author of the program but implements it with an emphasis on professional practice);
2. Implementation of a course/module/entire study program (this applies mainly to postgraduate programs) based on one’s own concept (prepared from start to finish independently), based on diagnosed demand, in a situation where the course/module/program is a response to industry needs;
3. A solution is also accepted in which classes in a given course are co-taught by a theoretician (lecture part) and a practitioner (practical part – exercises, workshops, laboratories, projects). It is also worth mentioning that more and more frequently we encounter business practitioners holding a doctoral degree in a specific discipline, which makes the lecture conducted by them take on a more practical character.

Serving as an academic lecturer for an employee coming from the socio-economic environment of the university is a great prestige and proof of a high level of knowledge and competence, as well as the trust placed in both the individual entrepreneur and their specific employee. Conducting classes by practitioners also brings certain logistical and organizational challenges – these practitioner-lecturers usually work in their enterprises (which constitute their primary place of employment) between 8:00 AM – 4:00 PM or 9:00 AM – 5:00 PM, which necessitates holding classes mainly in the afternoons and evenings, which is not always met with approval from students. Among the challenges, one can also identify situations in which a given person may be an excellent specialist in a field but lacks teaching skills and is unable to convey knowledge to students – qualifications and didactic skills are two different issues. In the opinion of the author of this article, however, the benefits of employing individuals from business as lecturers are so far-reaching for both the university and the student that all parties involved in the cooperation should make every effort to ensure that the transfer of knowledge from the market to study programs proceeds smoothly, and the role of the university and the staff responsible for the selection of teaching personnel should be to appropriately match the specialist to the specific course.

### **Equipping laboratories with equipment and granting patronage to study programmes/ specializations**

To conclude this subsection, a few words about a more material aspect of cooperation between universities and the socio-economic environment. This cooperation may also take the form of specific support that a commercial company is willing to provide to a university. This refers, for example, to the donation of specific equipment that helps educate students, allowing them to understand the functioning of a particular device or apparatus. Companies can also donate equipment such as computers (due to upgrades to newer models), classroom furnishings such as desks and furniture, supply samples of materials to be used during classes, or even donate vehicles for educational purposes. In the case of practice-oriented universities, it is also common practice to jointly establish specialized laboratories, in which students, as part of additional classes or scientific clubs, will conduct specialized activities (often with the involvement of employees from the "donor companies"). A good practice illustrating this approach is the establishment of four specialized laboratories, which were opened in cooperation with external partners for the Computer Science program at the University College of Enterprise and Administration in Lublin in the years 2022–2024, including:

- 1) **Cybersecurity Laboratory** – in cooperation with Capgemini (the company provided free software for conducting classes);
- 2) **Data Analytics Laboratory** – in cooperation with Lingaro (the company provided classroom equipment, co-created the postgraduate program titled "Data Analytics", in which more than half of the lecturers are employees of that company);
- 3) **Computer Graphics and Game Design Laboratory** – in cooperation with Pyramid Games (the company designated employees to conduct classes within the specialization of the same name);
- 4) **Artificial Intelligence Laboratory** – in cooperation with Sii (the company designated employees to conduct classes within the specialization of the same name).

### **Business scholarships**

Awarding scholarships by commercial companies to students achieving very good academic results is a relatively new practice. A good example is the joint initiative of the Lublin City Hall, Lublin's higher education institutions, and companies from the socio-economic environment operating in Lublin. The municipal scholarship program aims to support the most talented students and enable them to complete internships in large and well-known companies, to encourage them to stay on the Lublin labour market after graduation, and to build a positive image of Lublin-based companies among students. As part of the business scholarship, a student receives a several-month scholarship funded by a specific company, acts as an ambassador of the company at the university on the one hand, and as an ambassador

of the university in the company on the other hand, which may bring these two sides closer in the context of future cooperation (*Stypendia biznesowe*, n.d.).

## Summary

Cooperation between higher education institutions and the socio-economic environment in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has gone far beyond standard, traditional patterns. A modern university, particularly a practice-oriented university, is no longer just a place where knowledge is transmitted and science is created. It is an interdisciplinary hub that integrates academic, business, and local government communities, and that innovatively, creatively, and entrepreneurially shapes the surrounding reality. The multitude of areas of cooperation between universities and the socio-economic environment is proof that the mission of the university has undergone a transformation, and its significant role in shaping economic and business processes is indisputable. This is reflected in legal regulations at the national level, in the strategic documents of institutions/organizations that make up the socio-economic environment, as well as in the strategic documents of the universities themselves. For all parties involved in the cooperation, it brings tangible benefits, and the cooperation itself naturally deepens and expands into new areas and levels. In the second part of the article – the practical one – a unique example of university–local government–business cooperation on a national scale will be discussed, which in the author’s opinion is a model initiative – the “MATCH” project.

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**Jacek Lis** – magister stosunków międzynarodowych na Uniwersytecie Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej w Lublinie, od 2019 roku związany z Wyższą Szkołą Przedsiębiorczości i Administracji w Lublinie, gdzie od 2022 roku pełni funkcję kanclerza. Jego zainteresowania oscylują wokół tematów dotyczących współpracy uczelni wyższych z otoczeniem społeczno-gospodarczym, umiędzynarodowienia uczelni wyższych i współpracy z partnerami zagranicznymi w kontekście rozwijania programów kształcenia i szkoleń skierowanych do środowiska akademickiego.

