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POLISH HIGHER EDUCATION ON THE WAY TO THE EUROPEAN ACADEMIC STANDARDS

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The paper discusses both the traditions and contemporary challenges of Polish higher education. It shortly presents the Polish academic tradition which started in 14th century as well as contemporary attempts at reform. As a result of the political transformation in 1989, the Polish society turned their back on the Eastern model and embraced the Western one and with it a new perspective on academic education and research. However, old systemic relicts hinder the efficient operation of the Polish higher education institutions and their smooth transformation to meeting the Western European standards. The author discusses such problems of the contemporary higher education system in Poland as the sudden growth of the number of private institutions of higher education in the last decades, multiple employment and nepotism, launching of new academic programmes, adjusting of higher education institutions to the Western academic standards, and granting of academic degrees and titles.

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INTRODUCTION

Ever since the first universities were established in the 12th century, didactic and research standards in academia have been shaped by those European countries which relatively early recognized the educational needs of their societies. These were Italy, France and England. Slightly later the group expanded to the Germanic countries and, finally, the United States. In fact, a few vital standards for research and teaching applied today have been originally developed in the USA (e.g. ECTS). The proud Europeans, however, very reluctantly admit that these are in fact borrowings and use designates, which suggest that whatever is best, worth preserving and imitating, grew and matured on the old continent.

The *Bologna process* perfectly illustrates the phenomenon. Referring to the history of the oldest universities (the first was established in 1088 in

Bologna) the idea promotes such models of higher education that cherish tradition, at the same time enriching it with whatever fits the needs of the modern society¹. But what are these needs? A synthetic answer to this question can be found in an article available at the website of the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education authored by Andrzej Kraśniewski, entitled: *Proces Boloński: dokąd zmierza europejskie szkolnictwo wyższe?* [*The Bologna Process: What is the European Higher Education Heading for?*]. One of the first sentences clarifies that the objective is to “establish by 2010 a European Higher Education Area based on a set of common guidelines for organisation and education”². It also discusses such issues as student and academic staff mobility. The author claims that the Bologna process aims “not at the standardisation of higher education systems across Europe, but at their <<harmonisation>> or <<convergence>>, which can be achieved by developing common rules of cooperation that would allow for the diversity and autonomy of individual countries and their universities”. Yet, in reality, the process is indeed heading for standardisation and the vision of academics is not always shared and realised by the civil servants, clerks and consultants that shape the process in various EU committees, councils, bureaus and the so called *follow-up groups*. I would not like to engage in discussions on the functioning of the EU administration here, which, however, is related to the standardisation process and to the attempts to unify the European higher education, especially in the EU Member States. Poland joined the European Union relatively late i.e. on 1st May 2004. Thus, it needs to catch up both with the old standards and with very recent developments, of course not only in the realm of higher education, but I will limit myself to discuss only these.

POLISH ACADEMIC TRADITION

Poland can boast a long academic tradition, but it only had few academic institutions in the distant past. The oldest was established in 1348 in Kraków: the Jagiellonian University, whose golden years came in the 16th century and were in the 18th century followed by a gloomy period, when Hugo Kołłątaj, one of the university’s graduates, called it a “fossilized mammoth”³. The Polish and Lithuanian Commonwealth also had two insti-

¹ The University of Bologna counts 23 faculties and educates approximately a hundred thousand students a year.

² C.f. . A. Kraśniewski, *Proces Boloński: dokąd zmierza europejskie szkolnictwo wyższe?* [*The Bologna Process: What is the European Higher Education Heading for?*], www.nauka.gov.pl/

³ C.f.. H. Kołłątaj, *Raport z wizytacji Akademii Krakowskiej odbytej w r. 1777* [The report on a visit to the Cracow Academy in 1777], in: *Wybór pism naukowych*, Warsaw 1953, p. 155.

tutions of higher education (in Lviv and Vilnius), but they were in an even worse condition. Moreover, in the same century Poland counted 37 seminars and priests' training colleges, but they could not have played as vital a role as the universities. Their mission was different – to educate (usually for two years) future Church officials and priests. Moral theology and liturgy dominated their curricula which were all taught in Latin. The Warsaw Theatines were the first to understand the deficiencies of such an education and attempted to improve the teaching programme. Stanisław Konarski (1700 – 1773) followed their footsteps and reformed *Collegium Nobilium*. The new improved curriculum included modern languages, law and geography, while a course on “new philosophies” introduced the legacy of Descartes, Locke and Wolff. These changes were later implemented by the Commission of National Education in other colleges and became a model for the education reform at the Jagiellonian University (carried out by Hugo Kołłątaj in 1777 – 1783) and at the University of Vilnius (ordered by Marcin Poczobutt Odlanicki). Almost all attempts to improve the level of the higher education in Poland were abandoned when the country lost its sovereignty at the turn of the 19th century.

In 1918, once sovereignty was regained after World War I, the universities (including the University of Warsaw established in 1816) had to be adjusted to the needs of the then contemporary society. They were, however, still few and far between: 20 in total, including 13 state-owned ones, and only a handful represented a relatively high standard. This exclusive group extended to the universities in Cracow, Warsaw and Poznan, as well as to the Warsaw University of Technology and the Warsaw University of Life Sciences. All of them were closed down during World War II and higher education continued at clandestine universities only.

Immediately after the war, Poland was ruled by the communists, who admittedly created a large number of higher education institutions (at the end of their reign the number soared to about a hundred) but focused mostly on their educational role. The quality of teaching was anything but high and in many respects did not meet the Western standards. This is perfectly understandable as the majority of the teaching staff either never engaged in any research activity or only at a level that could not guarantee any remarkable scientific success. What is worse, many teachers tried to compensate for the lack of academic achievements with the so-called social activism. Not always did it translate into an active propaganda of the Marxist ideology. Sometimes such activism limited itself to a membership in organisations that focused on areas only remotely related to the academia or even completely irrelevant to it. But it almost always caused a change of focus and distracted from what should always remain at the heart and soul

of academia i.e. research and education. Such activism, however, was very appreciated by the authorities and gradually turned into a formal prerequisite for a promotion to the position of an assistant or a university professor.

The dramatic events of Poland's modern history shaped the life of the Polish academia. Some were marked by a significant involvement of the academics, while the events of 1968 were instigated by students. They failed, however, to bring about any material changes both in the entire Polish society and the universities alone. The workers' movement of August 1980 was far more effective. They also started with the slogan "socialism yes, perversions no" (at least initially), but as the events unfolded, different social groups voiced their criticism of the socialist ideology and its practical applications more and more loudly.

The trend could also be seen at universities, which called for a radical reform of their curricula (even for a complete removal of the socio-political programmes oriented at the Marxist philosophy, politics and economy) and a dramatic revision of the status of higher education institutions (which had so far been stifled by the overprotectiveness of the socialist state and longed for an autonomy allowing them, among other things, to elect representatives of their own authorities).

After the introduction of the martial law in Poland (in December 1981) these attempts were thwarted and individuals most actively involved in the opposition were either detained or emigrated abroad. A vast number stayed at the universities and contributed to the so-called round table talks (6 February - 4 April 1989). As a result, the then opposition managed to enter the government after the elections to the Sejm (the lower house of the Polish parliament) and the Senate, held on 4th June 1989. These events made the Polish society turn their back on the Eastern model and embrace the Western one and with it a new perspective on academic education and research.

ATTEMPTS AT REFORM

Academics were one of the first social groups that tried to reform higher education institutions and adjust them to the needs of the then contemporary society and the requirements of the then current research and education standards. They emerged already during the Solidarity movement, that is, in 1980. I would call such attempts "a bottom-up reform following the simplest rules". Driven not only by the students, but also the younger academic staff, these attempts at reform were guided by only a few beliefs. The first one centred around the idea that "everyone, be it a renowned university professor or an aspiring young assistant professor, has an equal right to

give an opinion on any matter relating to the academia and their opinions are equally important". The second assumed that anyone who during the reign of the people's democracy sided with the opposition made a better candidate for a representative of the university authorities (a rector, dean, head of an institute etc.) than a communist collaborator. The third viewed "every institution of higher education, regardless of its research and didactic success, as independent enough to decide on matters relevant for its existence". Usually these simple and psychologically understandable beliefs could count on the support of trade unions (active also in academia), especially "Solidarity", which made an indisputable contribution to the fall of the communist rule in Poland.

In reality, they were put into practice with varied success at different higher educational institutions. Not all universities have been radically changed and some structures still resemble a relict of the previous era. Not always was it possible to elevate the active members of the anti-communist opposition to high academic ranks. Nor have all the universities managed to gain sufficient independence and self-governance to manage entirely without external support. This situation has been shaped by a number of factors, such as the need to obtain financial resources from the state or the opportunistic attitude of some members of the academia (including the university professors, who had survived many commotions and developed their own methods for dealing with them). Here and there the success of the reformers was spectacular. The results are still visible in the form of electoral regulations that enable a well organized university majority (usually composed of students and non-academic staff, rather than professors) to appoint *truly* their own representatives to the decision-making and consultative bodies at their institutions (the senate, faculty councils etc.). On the other hand, there are also such 'relicts' as institutes or departments, which should have been gone years ago as their existence can no longer be reasonably justified due to a lack of qualified staff. It was easy to bring them to life in the previous era, but dissolving them constitutes a problem today. Old systemic relicts hinder the efficient operation of the Polish higher education institutions and their smooth transformation to meet the Western European standards.

The 90s saw also the attempts at top-down reforms ordered by members of the government and legislative bodies. One of them was made by the Minister of Science and Higher Education, Prof. Mirosław Handke⁴. His proposal triggered such long and heated debates in academia that the entire

⁴ C.f. M. Handke, *Dyskusja trwa [The discussion continues]*, "Forum Akademickie" No, 6/99, p. 20.

venture ended with only two approved changes: a pay rise for academic teachers and the creation of the Polish State Accreditation Committee. His successors were more effective, as a new *Higher Education Act* was adopted on 27th July 2005. Although it has been modified time and time again, it still formally remains in force. The changes adopted by the Sejm on 18th March 2011 do not form a new law, but constitute an amendment of the old one, just as the complementary *Act on Academic Degrees and Academic Titles and Degrees and Titles in the Arts*.

It is worth reminding what the bone of contention was before the said law entered into force. One of the most vigorous discussions considered the budgetary allocation for higher education. The government announced spending cuts on science, which greatly annoyed members of the academic community. The proposal for 1998 – 2000 envisaged earmarking 0.47 percent of GDP for science, which was over 20 percent less than in 1992 (already a lean year for Polish science)⁵. A robust debate ensued after a statement of the former Rector of the University of Warsaw, Prof. Andrzej K. Wróblewski. In his statement published in the leading Polish daily “Gazeta Wyborcza” (of 25.04.1998) he claimed that the then deputy prime minister and the minister of finances, Leszek Balcerowicz (also a professor) “relished the prospect of killing Polish science”. The then leader of the Freedom Union parliamentary club, Tadeusz Syryjczyk, replied in an interview for “Wprost” magazine that “many scientists found their way in the new system and became successful, while others vent their frustration in protests”. He also added that “the real problem is, whether the resources allocated to science are properly utilised”. That is why he posed the following question: “Should all accredited research and education institutions be financed from the budget?”. His answer was that maybe it would have been better, if some tried to find other sources of income on their own⁶.

There were no obvious answers to this rather rhetorical question: no one aware of the Polish situation in academia ever doubted that some institutions should not be subsidized by the state. On the contrary, instead of waiting for the ministerial decisions and counting on state funding, higher edu-

⁵ In his commentary on the allocation of resources for research and development (R+D), Prof. Bogdan Marciniak emphasized that “the fundamental weakness of R+D financing in Poland, when compared to medium developed EU Member States, is not only an alarmingly low level of budget financing (which decreased from 1% of GDP in 1989 to 0.35% of GDP in 2002), but also a similarly alarming level of non-budget financing from enterprises (estimated at 0.3 of GDP), characteristic of less developed countries”. C.f. B. Marciniak, *Transformacja systemu finansowania nauki i działalności badawczo-rozwojowej w Polsce* [Transforming the financing of science, research and development in Poland], “Humaniora”. Biuletyn No. 15/2003, p. 3.

⁶ C.f. “Wprost” No. 19/98, p. 20.

cation institutions started to take action in order to obtain additional sources of income. The most commonly applied solution involved the introduction of paid extramural courses (although Article 70 of the Polish *Constitution* stipulates that education in Poland shall be free of charge). For many decision-makers in the academia the question whether or not to launch paid extramural courses was an easy one. The major obstacle was the Constitution. Finally, such creative formulations as “additional educational services” allowed to bend the law.

This was nothing in comparison with private institutions of higher education, which truly mushroomed at this time (exceeding 350 at one point). Their sole limit was the depth of their students’ pockets. Thus, paradoxically, when spending on higher education in Poland was cut, the number of students soared. For example, in 1990 the number of students in Poland was estimated at around 400 thousand, in 1998 it jumped to over 1 million and 50 thousand (including approximately 200 thousand in private schools) to reach an astonishing number of 1 million 800 thousand in 2002 (two thirds of which attended private schools)⁷. Most of the private schools focused on business. Many closed down in the following years – it is not that the situation of businessmen in Poland has drastically deteriorated, but people eager to start business activity realized that such schools cannot provide them with the necessary qualifications.

The sudden growth of the number of private institutions of higher education and the soaring number of students were not accompanied by an influx of academic teachers. Therefore, in popular programmes one professor educated even several hundred students⁸. At schools, where lectures and exams were carried out by experienced professors, the quality of education was relatively good. There were cases, however, when those duties fell upon inexperienced teachers holding Ph.D. and M.A. degrees. The State Accreditation Committee, who audited the quality of education, made numerous, though futile attempts to curb such practices. Many such institutions met the obligatory conditions only on paper by employing a sufficient number of professors on a contract. In practice, the professors’ teaching load was delegated to teachers holding Ph.D. and M.A. degrees, which guaranteed lower costs. As a result, Poland suffered from a kind of academic pa-

⁷ C.f. the report prepared by the Ministry of National Education and Sport entitled: *Strategy for the development of higher education in Poland by 2010, I: The current situation of higher education in Poland*.

⁸ The general statistical indicator expressing the ratio of students per professors in Poland equalled approximately 100 in 1998/1999, which was a similar result to France. It was very different from Germany, which in 1998/1999 had about 1 million 800 thousand students and 37,626 professors, which translated into about 50 students per one professor.

thology, as many professors held several positions at different universities, sometimes in distant geographic locations (hence they were dubbed “carriage professors”). The phenomenon has been discussed, among other areas, in the ministerial guidelines for the amendment of the *Higher Education Act* and the *Act on Academic Degrees and Academic Titles and Degrees and Titles in the Arts*. Other academic pathologies, such as a commercial approach to private education are mentioned as well. It is a fact that many private schools are more preoccupied with their business objectives than didactics, not to mention research. The list of problems that the decision-makers had and still have to grapple with, is of course much longer.

THE NEW LAW

Let us have a closer look at the legal attempts to adjust Polish higher education to the European standards, in particular at the selected provisions of the *Higher Education Act* (amended on 18th March 2011) as well as the *Act on Academic Degrees and Academic Titles and Degrees and Titles in the Arts*⁹. Today these laws are often severely criticised, and I believe they are by no means perfect. On the contrary, many issues call for an amendment. But they also are a window of opportunity for the Polish higher education system. I would like to believe at least that the opportunities outweigh the potential pitfalls.

Higher Education Act ...

Multiple employment. Multiple employment does not have to be pathological. It becomes a problem when an individual professor or a doctor juggles three or more jobs at different universities and lacks time for personal academic growth or even for a good preparation for classes. The new law only partially prevents such situations from happening. The amended *Higher Education Act* stipulates that “an academic teacher employed on a contract at a state university may commence or continue additional employment on a contract for a different employer or carry out a business activity only with consent of the Rector”. Rectors announced that, as a rule, they will refuse to grant such consent. To be clear, if this approach translated into their employment policy, private institutions of higher education relying on multiple employment will face a real disaster and academic teachers employed in multiple positions are bound to make a difficult choice.

⁹ C.f. www.nauka.gov.pl/szkolnictwo-wyzsze/reforma-szkolnictwa-wyzsze.

Launching new educational programmes. Educational programmes are a showcase of any higher education institution and define their place on the Polish academic map. The amended *Higher Education Act* grants an autonomous right to launch educational programmes to the universities authorized to grant postdoctoral degrees and meeting certain additional conditions. In such a case, a university may launch a new programme “not subject to an official decision of a relevant minister of higher education, provided that the new programme has been approved by the university senate and meets all the criteria of the Polish National Qualifications Framework”. This idea is generally good and well justified. Hopefully, university senates will be guided by the real labour market needs and common sense, and not chiefly by professors’ ambitions to head their own educational programmes, and will, furthermore, be able to distinguish an authentic educational need from such an ambition and prevent from a multiplication of unnecessary educational programmes. Today, we already rank high in the number of educational programmes in Europe. It may happen that as a result of the discussed amendment Poland will overtake the leaders in this field i.e. the United States. American universities are also subject to market demands, but even there selling an attractively packaged, though worthless, educational product is not a common practice. Such problems should be prevented by the aforementioned National Qualifications Framework and the Polish State Accreditation Committee. The future will show whether or not this solution is an efficient one.

Contract for employment. The amended *Higher Education Act* states that “only academic teachers holding a professor’s degree shall be employed by nomination (on a permanent employment contract)” while all the remaining academic teachers shall be employed on a contract for a specified period, which is a real revolution at the Polish public universities. Permanent contracts (with employment guarantee until retirement) will be limited to only few members of the academic staff. Others have to be ready for periodic assessment (biannual) and the prospect of unemployment. The project submitted to the Sejm subcommittee provided that the same conditions would also apply to those academic teachers who already have been nominated but do not hold a professorial title yet. Ultimately, the subcommittee decided not to deprive this group of the rights that have already been granted. Still, such members of academic staff will be now more frequently subject to periodic assessment (earlier once in four years) and a second negative assessment will effect a termination of their contract. Let us hope that the rectors, who will have to make those difficult decisions, will not be vulnerable to sentiments, pressure and the recommendations of the professor's colleagues and will terminate the contract. Such a solution caters for

the needs of countless Ph.D. holders, who despite their academic success are unable to find employment at universities, and for the needs of those academic institutions which can boast a high number of academic staff but not with a high mobility rate among its professors.

Family relations. The *Higher Education Act* is very explicit and unambiguous about family relations: “academic teachers and their spouses, family members, second-degree relatives and persons remaining in custody, guardianship or adoption-like relations employed at the same institution may not remain within the same direct reporting line”. The law does not leave any leeway, there are no “special conditions” – all employees should be subject to this provision without exception. The amended law does not lead to any disastrous consequences, but requires those institutions which cultivate family academic traditions to take difficult steps. I am certain that the academic community is aware of the problem and the people involved. This is a huge obstacle not only for the institutions, but also for those staff members who remain in charge of their relatives both at home and at work, in individual institutes or departments. I hope that state-owned institutions will ultimately opt for the public interest, and that academics will find a good solution to satisfy both the legal requirements and their own aspirations in this field.

The Act on Academic Degrees and Academic Titles and Degrees...

Doctoral degrees. There are more and more doctors nowadays (each year produces another 5 thousand). There is a problem, however, with their mobility and employment opportunities at higher education institutions¹⁰. An increased mobility of this group should be achieved by the amendments of the above mentioned act. The provisions regarding doctors and doctoral students unfortunately have so far not triggered any vigorous response in the academic community. If I understand the motives of the legislators correctly, the introduced amendment should stop bad supervisors from producing bad doctors, and prevent renowned professors from forcing their doctoral students to become faithful followers of their own academic thought (ending cooperation if that does not happen). Let us hope that the discussed bad practices will be curbed by another vital change requiring external reviewers for each Ph.D. dissertation.

Postdoctoral degrees. The most controversial provisions of the amended *Act on Academic Degrees and Academic Titles and Degrees and Titles*

¹⁰ C.f. *Raport o mobilności naukowców [Report on academic mobility]*, in: “Forum Akademickie” No. 12/2010.

in the Arts refer to the postdoctoral degree. The most extreme proposals considered eliminating the postdoctoral degree completely, or introducing even stricter procedures that could successfully filter out low quality output. In the end, the postdoctoral degree is still there, but it will be awarded based on radically different conditions. Whether or not it is a change for the better will not be discussed here. Still, I hope that both the Central Commission for Academic Degrees and Titles, whose role has increased with the new amendments, and the universities authorised to award postdoctoral degrees, will be able to live up to the new situation. This is the more difficult as until 1st October 2013 one may choose between the old and the new procedures, which creates additional obstacles for the institutions responsible for them. As a head of such an institution, I have observed an incredible commotion among the affected academics entitled to make the choice.

Professorship. When the proposals were still being prepared, the issues regarding the requirements and procedures for professorial promotion were not so widely debated as the ones regarding the postdoctoral degree. Today, however, it is evident that the change is radical and even professors long past this stage in their academic career find it hard to accept. I will not quote the provisions of the amended act that raise the most serious doubts and cause reservations among experienced professors¹¹, but let me express the hope that the new regulations on awarding the professorial title will contribute to an increase of highly qualified professors, who recently have been very rare. I do of course try to understand the motivations behind the introduced changes. The provision reading: “the professorial title may be awarded to a person, who has (...) participated in the award of a doctoral degree at least three times as a supervisor and has at least three times been a reviewer in the award of a doctoral or a postdoctoral degree” must have been dictated by the fact that while the old regulations were still in force, the professorial title was conferred even after a successful supervision of only one doctoral candidate (regardless of their quality). If this article discussed potential fears connected with the new law, I would certainly ask the following question: how many candidates to the professorial title can meet these requirements and in what time span? Spreading panic is not my intention. I will limit myself to the comment that hopefully the new legal requirements for the professorial title will not cause a dramatic increase of new mediocre doctors.

To end on a positive note, I would like to discuss an issue that I really do appreciate in both acts. It has not been expressly stated in any of the provisions, but emerges from almost all of them: the issue of transparency

¹¹ C.f. J. Brzeziński, Podaj cegłę [Brick by brick], in: “Forum Akademickie” No. 12/2010.

in academia. I understand it as a full disclosure of all information not subject to the Personal Data Protection Act. A real revolution is likely to take place in this field. In my almost forty-year experience in academia I have many times seen situations in which an academic promotion was not dictated by one's research or didactic achievements, but by a favourable opinion of befriended professors. In the ministerial guidelines for the amendment of the discussed acts this problem was referred to as a "discretionary nature" of academic decisions and classified as one of the academic pathologies. I hope that the present legal regulations will contribute to its elimination.