

THE MAJOR PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES OF THE EDUCATION QUALITY MANAGEMENT IN VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS

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Abstract: The reflections on the topic of this article have been divided into two parts. The first one has been devoted to changes within regulations concerning higher education, which directly and indirectly are connected with the quality of education. Furthermore, the most crucial dilemmas, according to the authors, associated with the education quality management in vocational schools have been described. These dilemmas to a high extent stem from the shortage of scientific and didactic staff employed in this type of schools as a place of primary employment. Therefore, it results in a range of significant problems and challenges many vocational schools face, especially in the context of dynamic changes taking place in demography and the area of regulations concerning tertiary education.

Key words: higher education, vocational schools, quality management, internal education quality assurance system

Introduction

During the last two decades we witnessed the educational revolution in the Polish higher education. There was a significant rise in the number of students from 404,000 in the academic year 1990/1991 to 1954 thousand in the academic year 2005/2006. Although this number steadily declined in subsequent years reaching the level of 1677 thousand in the academic year 2012/2013 [2, p. 59], nevertheless, it means that students constituted over 12% of the working force in Poland [9, p. 27]. Simultaneously in the considered period the gross enrolment ratio increased, thus the whole number of students as a percentage of people ages 19 to 24 years old, from a dozen or so to over 50%. Currently, in terms of the percentage of people aged 25 to 64 with a university degree, Poland is left behind the average of the OECD Member countries by about 8 percentage points. Taking into consideration high educational aspirations of young people, it may be assumed that in the consecutive years this distance will be consistently getting smaller [12, p. 8].

The number of students, which increased by nearly 1.5 mln and a mounting (by more than 40%) enrolment ratio within 20 years, should be considered a huge success of Polish transformation. Nevertheless, the price of this success is extremely high because it is only the success in quantitative terms accompanied by a dramatic fall in the quality of education. It has been confirmed by various reports and results of conducted research, which indicate a growing gap between knowledge and skills of graduates entering the labour market and

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employers' expectations. According to the employers, the students are not prepared to work due to lack of the following skills: ability to think critically, analytically or economically and look for cause-effect relations, formulate messages and communicate, find and sort out information, make independent judgements, use foreign languages, work in teams and manage these teams, organize and carry out projects, learn continuously and share knowledge with others, conduct negotiations [15, p. 354-355]. Unfortunately, the system of higher education in Poland fulfils neither employers' expectations nor students' ones and the latter are frequently dissatisfied with the chosen field of study and (hereinafter referred to as HEIs) higher education institutions [14, p. 64-65], but also the practical aspect of education.

Undoubtedly, the problems specified above served as the basis for reforming the system of higher education in Poland, which was initialized with the Act of 18 March 2011 [20]. This law introduced a range of fundamental modifications in many aspects as regards functioning of Polish HEIs. Although the most apparent change is connected with the didactic process, which nowadays is oriented on learning outcomes not on learning content as it has been so far, but a thorough and rigorous reading of the law and subordinate legislation [4, 5] along with reading a strategy on education for sustainable development in Poland [10, 11] and analyzing the processes taking place in higher education in the EU Member States for more than a decade [13, 22] allows to state that the most fundamental change is making education quality management compulsory, therefore putting a pressure on HEIs to adapt education to labour market needs. It is manifested in implementation and improvement of internal education quality assurance systems by HEIs.

The aim of this article is, on the one hand, to present changes within regulations as regards tertiary education, which directly and indirectly are associated with the quality of education, and on the other hand, to depict the most important dilemmas connected with education quality management in vocational schools in the context of dynamic changes taking place in demography and the area of regulations concerning tertiary education. According to the authors, implementation and enhancement of education quality assurance systems help (or it should help) to look at the way HEIs are managed from a different perspective [3, 23, p. 124-125] and consequently lead to adjustment of higher education to labour market requirements.

Changes of regulations which are directly and indirectly connected with the quality of education

It has been nearly three years since the amendment to the Act - Law on Higher Education of 27 July 2005 and regulations of the Minister of Science and Higher Education (hereinafter referred to as MSHE) came into force and already some laws have significantly been modified. A few regulations and the Act itself are at the stage of introducing changes. In the authors' opinion, all these fast

changes taking place in the environment of fierce competition between HEIs (competing for students due to demographic decline) unfortunately are not conducive to appropriate education quality management although its role is all the time stressed in many regulations issued by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education and provisions of the Polish Accreditation Committee (hereinafter referred to as PAC). Moreover, the authors are under the impression that the current binding laws, particularly some of PAC's guidelines as regards preparing the self-evaluation reports and carrying out site visits, aim of whose is to carry out programme and institutional assessments, impose on HEIs not only the obligation to take up real pro-quality actions, but the obligation to collect 'evidence' confirming implementation and development of education quality assurance system. In the further part of this article, the most important introduced recently changes (in terms of the quality of education) with respect to tertiary education have been elaborated.

Among all the acts which lately have undergone some modifications there is one which should be paid an attention to while talking about the quality of education. Namely, it is the Regulation of 23 August 2012 by the Minister of Science and Higher Education (MSHE) amending the regulation on the conditions of providing degree programmes in a given field and a given level of study [7]. In this regulation, in comparison with the original version, the level of possible changes within the course aiming at improvement of study programme has been raised from 30% to 50% ECTS credits. Therefore, it means that the changes within courses for which students can get not more than 50% ECTS credits do not require PAC's opinion and any acceptance of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education to offer and provide students with a certain field of study – on condition that these modifications do not cause changes of learning outcomes. This regulation should be considered to be a move in the right direction. As it is not a rare situation when there is a necessity to introduce some changes within curriculum by HEIs caused by care about the quality of education and adjustment to labour market needs. Unfortunately, the other part of the mentioned regulation is problematic as it does not give sufficient room to manoeuvre because it forces to keep the same learning outcomes, which thereby does not motivate to improve study programmes. The only possibility to change the learning outcomes without asking MSHE for acceptance and without PAC's opinion is during the first year of the first educational cycle started in the academic year 2012/2013. Moreover, in the same law, in comparison with the previous version, it has been added that 'the internal education quality assurance system can take into account HEIs' performance which leads to plagiarism prevention and detection'.

Lately some changes have appeared in the resolutions of the Polish Accreditation Committee and although the latter are not a binding law, they have a significant influence on HEIs' performance in Poland. All the more, HEIs do not have an opportunity to appeal against PAC's assessment [19]. The Resolution of the Presidium of the State Accreditation Committee on guidelines for drawing up a

self-assessment report (Resolution No. 873, 2007) was repealed. It was modified a few times before and finally replaced by Resolution No. 461, 2012 under the same name [16]. In the content of the regulation hardly any compelling changes were introduced, nevertheless some elements encompassed in the Annex (Annex No. 1 to Resolution No. 461 / 2012 of the Presidium of the Polish Accreditation Committee of 25 October 2012) were modified in comparison to the previous version. In the template of self-evaluation report, prepared as part of the programme assessment, new requirements which must appear in this report were described. Namely, HEIs are obliged to enunciate the mission statement of the higher education institution and the strategy of the unit, but also the documents confirming the participation of external and internal stakeholders in the process of defining the concept of education in the field of study. Furthermore, people preparing the report were asked to complete the table (matrix) of learning outcomes, give information concerning the structure of grades from the last end-of-term exams and the last diploma exam, but also to make a range of documents, among others, theses written for the end of a given stage of study and diploma theses, project works and others which can prove that the learning outcomes have been achieved, accessible to the visitors from PAC. Moreover, in the template of self-evaluation report, prepared as part of the institutional assessment, a provision was put stating that it becomes a necessity to characterize and assess the system of academic, teaching and financial support, complaints procedures and conflict resolution system as well as cooperation with the student self-government and organizations of students and doctoral students. Besides the Resolution No. 873/2007 of 8 November 2007 on guidelines for the preparation of self-evaluation report, the changes were introduced into the following resolutions: Resolution No. 961/2011 of 24 November 2011 on the rules for staging site visits as part of programme evaluation and Resolution No. 962/2011 of 24 November 2011 on the rules for staging site visits as part of institutional evaluation. Resolution No. 462/2012 of the Presidium of the Polish Accreditation Committee of 25 October 2012 amended Resolution No. 961/2011 of 24 November 2011 on the rules for staging site visits as part of programme evaluation [17], and Resolution No. 463/2012 of the Presidium of the Polish Accreditation Committee of 25 October 2012 amended Resolution No. 962/2011 of 24 November 2011 on the rules for staging site visits as part of institutional evaluation [18]. Notwithstanding, as regards the mentioned above regulations, they were slightly modified and were to arrange some provisions in the appropriate order in the reports of site visits concerning both programme and institutional evaluations.

Apart from the changes in the described above resolutions, currently there are some steps taken to introduce modifications into some regulations of MSHE, as well as to amend the Act of 27 July 2005 Law on Higher Education. Bearing in mind the topic of this elaboration, some of the most crucial proposals which are to amend the Act are of special interest. The justification of the bill to amend the Act states that the future changes are to assure better quality of education,

simultaneously taking into consideration the programme autonomy of HEI. It directly and indirectly refers to vocational schools [21]. First of all, it is planned to introduce the following rule that a faculty without the authorization to confer academic doctor's degrees, thus vocational schools, will be limited to provide education solely in the fields of study with a practical profile. Only after getting experience in that domain and starting to conduct scientific research and receiving at least positive assessment of the quality of education issued by PAC, but not earlier than finishing the first full cycle of education, the faculty will be able to apply for launching the first-cycle and second-cycle studies in this area of studies with an academic profile. Secondly, it is predicted that another principle will be proposed, namely, over half of the curriculum described by the number of ECTS credits in the practical field of study will embrace practical classes shaping social competencies and skills, including skills learned during workshops, which will be led by people with professional experience gained outside HEIs in the area connected with the field of study. Furthermore, it is foreseen that organizing a three-month work placement will become obligatory in the fields of study with a practical profile. Thirdly, it is proposed to introduce the definition of the thesis and amend a range of requirements by an obligation to submit a dissertation necessary to graduate from the first-cycle and second-cycle programmes, as well as the long-cycle Master's degree programme. Limiting these requirements only to a diploma exam seems to be insufficient to verify a level of knowledge and skills of the graduates. Moreover, another obligation will be imposed on HEIs as regards checking the theses before the diploma exam (thesis defence) making use of anti-plagiarism system and the Polish software repository with written theses, which should limit and detect dishonesty while preparing them. Finally, another principle will be introduced as regards initiating proceedings on re-granting a suspended authorization to provide degree programmes in certain fields of study, at a certain level and profile of study. The procedure will start upon the application of HEI submitted to the Ministry of Science and Higher Education. It must be underlined here that in case of withdrawing or terminating an authorization in a certain area of study, the vocational school will be able to apply for granting an authorization to offer degree programmes in the same field of study, at the same level and profile of study, after 24 months since authorization's termination or withdrawal took place, whereas in other fields of study after 12 months.

Dilemmas connected with education quality management in higher vocational schools

Persuant to Art. 2 par. 1 point 23 of amended Law on Higher Education, a vocational school is a higher education institution providing first-cycle, second-cycle or long-cycle programmes and which is not authorized to confer the academic degree, namely doctor's degree. It should be emphasized that the recent policy pursued by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, which is reflected in changes as regards regulations, aims at distinguishing vocational schools from

research schools/universities. According to MSHE it can be achieved only through vocational schools' specialization in education in practical fields of study, in which the quality of education will determine practical skills of students and also thanks to re-profiling academic HEIs into research units where education will be connected with conducting scientific research in these schools and involving students in them. Bearing in mind the present state of tertiary education in Poland and demographic processes taking place, this philosophy in the authors' opinion seems to be right and justified. Nevertheless, as it often happens while implementing fundamental changes, there are a lot of uncertainties. At that stage, two things come in mind immediately, colloquially saying: 'the devil is in the details' and 'if no one knows what the deal is, then the deal is money'. These statements unintentionally will become the background of the further considerations. The authors will present in them their previous experience in the domain of education quality management gained during the process of creating and implementing the internal education quality assurance system in The State School of Higher Professional Education in Konin.

In the light of the occurring legal changes which have been described so far and the fact that nowadays a careful attention must be paid to the quality of education and subsequently making sure that education in HEIs meets the requirements and expectations of the labour market, there is no doubt that all Polish HEIs are burdened with additional works and duties. The question arises whether these workloads are well balanced between academic university-type institutions (in the future research institutions) and vocational schools. Apparently, the answer seems to be easy 'yes'. The same obligations have been imposed on these different types of institutions. However, it must be mentioned that general academic institutions, particularly those with the authorization to confer academic doctor's degrees were assigned additional duties, but also gained some privileges although it did not happen as regards vocational schools (e.g. the formers can introduce new fields of study without asking for MSHE's permission and PAC's opinion). The other thing which should be also taken into considerations is the fact that vocational schools, as a rule, are not very big institutions for which the obligation to fulfil extra duties stated in legal provisions become a real burden, especially financial problem connected with the necessity to find financial resources for additional full-time employment contracts. The other thing of great importance is the fact that vocational schools due to their size, but also location, have difficulty in finding professional solicitors who not only would look after legal matters, but would be able to apply new regulations and resolutions concerning higher education to day-to-day work. A mounting pile of problems is extended by another one. Namely, vocational schools quite frequently have a problem to guarantee the stability of the minimum staff, especially they need to employ a certain number of academic staff holding the academic title of professor or the academic degree of *doktor habilitowany*. The problems can become even more serious in the near future as the academic staff will have to get their Rectors' permission (Rectors of

home institutions) to be employed full-time in another HEI, usually a vocational school. Moreover, it is said with increasing frequency that the higher education subsidy from a government to HEIs with respect to academic staff would be granted only to finance scientific and academic staff members employed on a full-time basis in the place of primary employment (such a solution appeared in the proposed Ordinance of MSHE which was to change the Ordinance of 12 September 2012 concerning allocation and division of subsidy between public and non-public higher education institutions). Eventually, after public consultations, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education decided to withdraw these provisions [8]. However, it can be assumed that coming back to the proposed solutions is only a matter of time. It must be emphasized here that it is still a common phenomenon that the minimum staff in vocational schools consists of teachers whose place of primary employment is in other HEIs (it is their 'second' place of employment). Unfortunately, as a result another problem arises which is extremely difficult to deal with and rather not possible to solve: it is hard to expect involvement in vocational schools' matters and devotion to work from the didactic staff for whom these schools are an additional place of employment (and income) as it happens in case of teachers for whom vocational schools are place of primary employment, and therefore the primary source of income. Referring this part of discussion to the main idea of the article, thus the quality of education and consequently connecting education with labour market requirements and expectations, it is not possible to guarantee the adequate and satisfactory quality of education without full involvement of both scientific and didactic staff and administrative workers. Employees should be guided by one objective – the quality. Since not everything can be achieved by commitment of administrative workers and teachers for whom a certain vocational school is a place of primary employment. Lack or limited involvement of any groups of workers is the best recipe not for quality, but for mediocrity and inferior quality or the state which can be described with the following words: 'it will work out somehow'.

Summary

The issues presented in the previous part of this article are undoubtedly the major problems and challenges which HEIs are facing nowadays. Is there any way to overcome and deal with these problems and challenges? The best solution would be implementation of the private business sector management rules by vocational schools. Recent legal changes, particularly successive PAC's guidelines, question such a solution. The sector of higher education in Poland is becoming more and more formalized and bureaucratic, thereby overregulated. Analyzing consecutive documents which are the result of PAC's work, one can be under the impression that it is not real quality, but something described as nominal quality so the quality considered through the prism of created documents. As it has been signaled before, the very idea and philosophy of changes implemented in higher education is

positively assessed by the authors, whereas the problem seems to be transferring of particular legal provisions into specific PAC's guidelines.

Another solution of contemporary problems and challenges might be concentration of vocational schools mainly on practical education, which fully conforms to postulates and plans of MSHE. Therefore, it would be possible to limit the problems with minimum staff through involving people with practical experience in the didactic process. Unfortunately in this particular case there seems to be a crucial limitation in the current legal state. Namely, making these people members of minimum staff is connected with employing them on a full-time basis and therefore an obligation to provide them with a teaching load at a certain level and consequently an adequate monthly salary. Once non-public vocational schools are highly independent in this matter, public vocational schools, however, are limited by regulations on minimum salary rates for academic teachers [6]. It is not difficult to presume that this limitation brings further financial costs for HEI. Moreover, experience so far indicates that so called professionals with practical background are not interested in giving numerous classes. It also happens quite often that their financial demands are much higher than these of academic staff. This should not be surprising taking into account their practical experience. Hopefully, quite restrictive legal provisions in this respect will become less rigid and strict as in a bill to amend the Act on Higher Education there is an ordinance that academic teachers constituting the minimum staff of the field of study with a practical profile possessing out of school experience can be employed on a part-time basis not lower than 25% of full-time.

To sum up, it can be stated that we are witnessing crucial legal changes in higher education, which unfortunately are taking place in the environment of fierce competition of winning a client due to demographic decline [1]. It is highly possible that not the strongest and the biggest schools will survive the changes, but those which will be able to adapt to aforementioned modifications and will manage them skillfully. Those schools which will be innovative in functioning and implementing private business sector management are supposed to become leaders of the future.

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GLÓWNE PROBLEMY I WYZWANIA ZARZĄDZANIA JAKOŚCIĄ EDUKACJI W SZKOŁACH ZAWODOWYCH

Streszczenie: Rozważania nad tematem niniejszego artykułu zostały podzielone na dwie części. Pierwsza z nich poświęcona została zmianom w przepisach dotyczących szkolnictwa wyższego, które bezpośrednio i pośrednio związane są z jakością kształcenia. Ponadto, opisane zostały najbardziej istotne według autorów dylematy, związane z zarządzaniem jakością kształcenia w szkołach zawodowych. Dylematy te w dużym stopniu wynikają z braku pracowników naukowych i dydaktycznych zatrudnionych w tego typu szkołach jako podstawowym miejscu pracy. Dlatego też, prowadzi to do szeregu istotnych problemów i wyzwań, z jakimi borykają się liczne szkoły zawodowe, szczególnie w kontekście dynamicznych zmian zachodzących w demografii i zakresie regulacji dotyczących szkolnictwa wyższego.

Słowa kluczowe: wykształcenie wyższe, szkoły zawodowe, zarządzanie jakością, wewnętrzny system zapewniania jakości kształcenia

主要的问题和挑战中高职学校的教育质量管理

摘要: 这篇文章的题目的思考有已分为两个部分。第一个致力于内部条例关于高等教育，直接和间接相连的与教育质量的变化。此外，最关键的难题，作者认为，与职业院校的教育质量管理关联描述了。这些困境在很高的程度上源于科学和教诲雇用工作人员在这种类型的学校作为一个地方的主要就业的短缺。因此，它导致一系列的重大问题和面临的挑战很多高职院校，特别是在发生人口统计学和法规专上教育方面的动态变化

關鍵詞: 高等教育，職業學校，質量管理，質量保證內部系統。

关键词: 高等教育、职业教育、质量管理、内部教育质量保证体系