

# Accreditation system in Poland

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## Abstract

Poland, like many other countries, is trying to develop a system of higher education and system of quality assurance including an accreditation. Besides traditional university sector, we observe the rapid grow of the vocational (or “short-cycle”) sector (mostly non-state). After the ‘97, the system of independent Accreditation Commissions for different types of High Schools together with the Accreditation Commission of the Rectors Conference (KRASP, in 2001) was established. Also in 2001 the independent body the State Accreditation Commission was created. In the paper we will present our reflection on the experience we gathered during our four years work at the Accreditation Commissions and the arrangements related to the evaluation we have already manage to use during the external audits.

**Keywords:** Accreditation, evaluation.

## 1 The Background for Changes of the Educational System in Poland

In 1989 important political changes started taking place in Poland. Besides other areas, the changes also concerned system of education, in particular of the higher one. New laws, among others the Act on Higher Education, enabled revolutionary transformation; central steering and managing, meaning that the Ministry of Education in Warsaw always played the decisive role, was given up. First of all universities obtained, or actually regained, wide autonomy. The scope of the autonomy depended on how a particular university met specific academic requirements. The requirements were fulfilled by the largest universities having long tradition and a great number of experienced staff. The activities of non-autonomous universities in some areas were limited by the Ministry decisions. On one hand the situation caused dividing the universities into better and worse ones, on the other hand it stimulated the development of non-autonomous universities.

The same legal act enabled emerging of non-state higher education institutions, which could be established even by people with no associations to education. Education became a product, and that was accompanied by emerging of the “educational market” with all its characteristic consequences. It was a completely new phenomenon in Poland. This

situation resulted in a sort of uncontrolled and rapid growth of the sector, regardless of the fact that establishing a new university required the consent of an appropriate minister.

The abolition of the enrolment limits in state universities and the appearance of new non-state universities were conducive to the educational policy of the state, the aim of which was to increase the so called the students population indicator. The development of the system of education was very fast. All participants of the new market tried to make as much of the new freedom of acting as possible and wanted to join the trend of changes. The rapid character of changes suppressed and put away thinking over details and consequences of the new situation.

Another moment important for the higher education was the year 1997, when the Act on Higher Vocational Education was passed. This was the first attempt to regulate the unconstrained and uncontrolled development of new higher education institutions and expression of the will to create a new parallel education type – the sector of Higher Vocational Education.

All these factors resulted in the increase of the number of students from 400 thousand in 1989 to almost 1.8 million in 2003, including 600 thousand students of non-state high schools. At the same time the number of higher education institutions increased from 100 to almost 380, including over 260 non-state institutions.

## 2 The Challenges Resulting from the Changes in the System of Education

The problems faced by the higher education turned out very serious and varied. As the academic society is conservative by nature and unwilling to take up marketing actions, it is obvious that the moment has come when new, important challenges have to be taken [1].

1. As the result, of these undoubtedly favorable trends, higher education has moving towards “mass studies”, which in many cases, did not couple with proportional increase in expenditure of education, particularly per 1 student, thus lowering the quality of education. Teaching “mass courses” was hardly known in Poland, which does not mean that the quality of education in the previous

period was low. On the contrary, with the very limited student enrolment and the high number of academic teachers, good or even very good quality of education could be ensured. But the scale of this new phenomenon seems to have come as the big surprise. The concept of open university based on 19<sup>th</sup> century models, where the principle of education based on master-disciple relations could be followed easily, did not call for the introduction of many standards for comparisons of higher education quality; this would have even seemed to be incompatible with academic traditions.

2. The rapid growth of the student number with almost unchanged number of the academic staff resulted in significant increase of the teaching load (the number of teaching hours). Additionally the number of academics working subsequently in state and non-state universities increased significantly. Hence pathological situations started to occur when some people took up teaching responsibilities in many schools at the same time (especially at fashionable, popular with students programmes). Considerably heavier teaching responsibilities in many cases caused the necessity to lower the level of research and to limit the scientific activity.
3. The market character of education resulted in the need to create new curricula or even new study areas.
4. In 1990s the mechanism of financing higher education to a large extent depended on the number of students, which caused a fast growth of the number of people enrolled in studies, quite often completely without any justification in the academic staff and teaching facilities capacity. With the limits of the state funds the situation resulted in the serious decrease of financing per one student's education. In order to improve their budgets, universities significantly enlarged enrolment in evening and part-time studies, which opposite to regular studies are paid by the students.
5. The non-state (paid) higher education sector was able to react to quick changes and the market needs much more flexibly, which made the sector competitive to state universities carrying the burden of ineffective and overbuilt bureaucracy inherited from the previous system.

### 3 The Necessity to React

Many were under the illusion that very good academic staff and academic traditions themselves are enough to solve all problems. The quality of education did not play the crucial role in their not thought-out actions. This light-hearted way of thinking was to a certain extent justified by the fact that the problem had not appeared in the past, that there had been much less students and the staff had not been burdened by extra tasks (overtime) and had not worked on a few contracts.

The authors of the Act of 1990, considering the return of autonomy to universities as the most important task, quite

naively assumed that self-regulation mechanisms will work in the academic society, and that the society itself can *take care* of the decent level of education. It turned out quite soon that in the real life supervision and control are indispensable to assure proper functioning not only of the newly established private schools, but also of the state universities, which grow too fast [4].

The academic societies started to think over the problem and to discuss it. On one hand teaching was more and more time consuming, and the classes having been run in an unchanged form for numerous years had to be reformed. On the other hand an international programme TEMPUS appeared giving the chance to have a close look at the way the teaching was treated in the European Union countries, what solutions were used there, and how similar problems were solved. This resulted in further reflections on preventing potential irregularities.

A sort of by-factor was the development of the student exchange. After coming back from few-month studies at European universities our students began comparing the systems and postulate changes. At the same time students of western universities, brought up among different rules and academic demanded things obvious for them but having been introduced at our universities yet.

The problem of accreditation and the quality of education appeared with a greater strength in the minds of the academic society.

### 4 The Accreditation and the Quality of Education

The new situation of higher education as well as the unfavourable aspects connected with the situation started being perceived by the academic societies as a serious threat to transformation in the higher education sector [2,3]. Few years of discussions, numerous international contacts, including already mentioned TEMPUS programme inspired and virtually enabled creating in the years 1994 – 2002 the sector accreditation commissions. They were established under the patronage of the rectors conferences of different types of high schools organised in the Rectors Conference (KRASP).

Estimating the scope of danger, in 1998 the Ministry of Education caused under the act of parliament the establishing of the Accreditation Commission of Higher Vocational Education (KAWSZ). As the works on a new law on higher education were getting prolonged, it seemed necessary for the government to prevent unfavourable phenomena accompanying the transformations mentioned above, and thus (for the time being) the act in force was amended. The most important point of the amendment was establishing an accrediting body. The body was called the State Accreditation Commission (PKA).

## 5 The Accreditation Bodies

Discussion in the academic society led to establishing and launching the social accreditation activities. One by one Accreditation Commissions of various types of higher education were established:

- Association of the Managerial Education “Forum” – July 1994,
- Medical Academies – October 1997,
- Universities – March 1998,
- Pedagogical Schools – May 1998,
- Schools for Physical Training – April 1999,
- Schools of Agriculture – January 2001,
- Technical Universities – February 2001,
- Foundation for Promotion and Accreditation of Economy Studies – June 2001.

In 2002 the KRASP Accreditation Commission was established with the aim to create a common ground for cooperation and representation of sector commissions.

The culmination of these activities was the establishing in January 2002 of the State Accreditation Commission, which finished the four-year period of activities of the Accreditation Commission of Higher Vocational Education.

It can be clearly seen that the process of accreditation realised as a result of the universities agreement has been taking place for almost 10 years now, and the appointed accreditation commissions can pride themselves on many achievements, and thus:

- **The University Accreditation Commission** granted accreditation over 220 times to 29 study areas at 28 universities, out of which only 17 is represented in the Rectors Conference, whereas other universities are of a different type. A few dozen other proceedings are in progress now.
- **The Accreditation Commission of the Association of the Managerial Education “Forum”** accredited 9 universities in the study area Management and Marketing, 3 universities in the area Finance and Banking and 6 MBA programmes.
- **The Accreditation Commission of the Medical Universities** completed the accreditation process for all 11 faculties of medicine in Poland.
- **The Accreditation Commission of the Technical Universities** granted accreditation 29 times to 6 study areas at 13 universities (in 9 cases the accreditation process was one-year postponed). A few dozen other proceedings are in progress.

Already on the basis of the above information one can estimate the scope of the accreditation actions and the activity of the academic society, which undergoes the accreditation procedure voluntarily.

## 6 The Accreditation Commission of Higher Vocational Education and the State Accreditation Commission

The accreditation specified by the regulations of the state law had its beginnings in 1998 when the Act on Higher Vocational Education came into force. Under this law **The Accreditation Commission of Higher Vocational Education (KAWSZ)** came into being. The Commission was entitled to give its opinions on conditions of establishing new high schools and to take accreditation actions concerning the schools that already existed. During almost four years of its existence the Commission:

- evaluated 200 projects of establishing new vocational high schools,
- gave opinions on the basis of which over 90 non-state and 34 state vocational high schools were established,
- made over 50 inspections in vocational high schools after one year of their existence,
- made 78 resolutions and passed 297 opinions.

The unquestionable merit of the Accreditation Commission of Higher Vocational Education was creating the basis for the institutional accreditation encompassing the whole higher education in Poland.

**The State Accreditation Commission** started its work on 1 January 2002 on the basis of the Act on Higher Education amended in 2001 and as a statutory higher education organ operating for the benefit of the quality of education. The statutory character of the Commission means that it has special entitlements to control the quality of education. The State Accreditation Commission completely overtook the tasks of the Accreditation Commission of Higher Vocational Education and a large part of the tasks of the Main Council for Higher Education, with the objective to evaluate education at all universities in Poland, state as well as non-state ones.

In accordance with the Act the Commission should consist of 50 to 70 members. Currently 67 are appointed out of 599 candidates proposed by the academic society. Taking into consideration the number of study areas, universities, etc. ten teams working under the Commission have been established for the following study areas: humanistic sciences (9 members), natural sciences (5 members), mathematics-physics-chemistry (5 members), agriculture-forestry-veterinary (5), medical sciences (5), physical education (5), technical studies (8), economics (8), social studies and law (8), arts (5).

Besides, in order to perform its statutory tasks the Commission has appointed about 400 external experts, who review applications and participate in the universities evaluation procedure (audits).

### 6.1 The basic statutory tasks of the State Accreditation Commission are:

1. Giving opinions on the applications for establishing new universities, branches and out-of-town faculties or teaching centres,

2. Giving opinions on the applications for approving new study areas at already existing non-autonomous universities or vocational high schools,
3. Evaluating the quality of education,
4. Giving its consent for establishing and running new study areas different from the ones specified in the appropriate decree of the Minister for Higher Education and Sport.
5. Giving opinions on the applications for assigning programmes of studies offered in vocational high schools to appropriate study areas.

It has to be highlighted here that all higher education institutions in Poland are subordinate to the State Accreditation Commission.

In the first year of its operation the Commission considered 685 cases out of 718 that came in. Education in about 140 organisation units of high schools was evaluated. 161 Team sessions, 20 sessions of the Commission presidium and 2 plenary sessions were held.

In that period the State Accreditation Commission made 205 positive resolutions (29.9%) and 480 negative ones.

In 2002 the Commission commenced the accreditation process for 17 study areas, which was connected with doing 180 inspections. About 500 inspections are planned in 2003. According to the plans in 2003 all units will be evaluated.

## 6.2 What were the applications to the Commission about?

Most of the applications were for establishing new study areas (166 at the schools operating on the basis of the Act of 1997). 243 applications considered setting up new schools, 67 establishing branches/out-of-town faculties. The Commission also considered 58 applications for establishing new master studies. Some cases referred to assigning a specialisation to a study area. There were also 97 appeals, i.e. the applications for reconsideration.

## 6.3 The largest number of applications were considered by the teams for:

- economics – 211
- social studies and law – 172
- technical studies – 123

## 7 The Accreditation Commission of the Technical Universities

The setting up of the Accreditation Commission of the Technical Universities (KAUT) followed the discussions among the members of the Conference of the Vice-Rectors of Technical Universities for Studies. The discussions resulted from observing progressing inflation in the quality of education in Polish higher education. They were supported by the experiences gained under the TEMPUS project *INQUEST Internal Quality Education System* where on the Polish part the Warsaw University of Technology and the Technical University of Lodz were engaged. The discussions were also stimulated by contacts with other environments (universities,

schools of economics) at which the accreditation actions were more advanced.

The motion made at the Rectors Conference to launch accreditation at the technical universities after a long discussions resulted with making two resolutions in February 2001: *The Agreement of the Conference of the Vice-Rectors of Technical Universities for Studies About the Quality of Education Assurance* and *The Rules and Terms of Accreditation Procedure*, which were accepted by the universities senates. On the basis of these resolutions the Accreditation Commission of the Technical Universities came into being.

The following basic assumptions for the accreditation at technical universities were accepted:

- accreditation concerns study areas,
- accreditation is voluntary,
- costs of accreditation are covered by the unit volunteering for the evaluation,
- accreditation will be granted by the Accreditation Commission of the Technical Universities,
- the Commission will be supervised by the Rectors Conference,
- employers will be included in the accreditation process.

### 7.1 The rules and terms of Accreditation Procedure

The accreditation procedure for a specific study area is started after the application of minimum five units. A very important preliminary element of this procedure is preparation of accreditation standards. The task is performed by a specially appointed Expert Group. The members of the group are selected from among the people proposed by the units applying for accreditation. Every unit proposes two candidates from among its professors, three from other units and two from the industry or economy sector. From among these candidates members are selected to participate in the works of the Expert Group and of the Evaluation Teams (ZO), whose Secretary ought to be a person belonging to the study area expert group.

The standards have to respect the decisions included in *The General Recommendations for the Accreditation Standards* prepared by the Accreditation Commission of the Technical Universities and be presented and approved at the Commission plenary session. The standards for the quality of education of a study area are a set of detailed requirements grouped in the basic part and two groups of additional requirements. A unit applying for accreditation of a study area has to fulfil all the basic requirements, i.e. concerning the teaching staff, the content and curricula, system and organisation of education and the studying conditions. Supplementary requirements refer to other issues associated with education and significantly influencing it, which however may not be fulfilled by the unit.

In the accreditation procedure the key role is played by the self-assessment report prepared by the unit undergoing the accreditation process. The document should contain clear

statements referring to the accepted standards as well as additional information about the unit, including its special achievements.

After getting acquainted with the standards, the Evaluation Team begins its work with the detailed studies of the self-assessment report, and on the basis of the received documentation it makes preliminary review of the unit. Next stage of the Team's work is a two-day inspection in the accredited unit in accordance with the schedule clearly specified by the Accreditation Commission of the Technical Universities. As a consequence of these activities the Evaluation Team makes a report. The report has a standardised form approved by the Commission. Besides the descriptive part there is a place in the report for statements *yes/no* applying to fulfilling the requirements specified in the accreditation standards of the study area. The report should point to weak and strong sides of the unit, but it must not contain an evaluation as such or a motion of granting or not granting the unit with accreditation. The report is submitted to the Accreditation Commission of the Technical Universities and to the unit of interest.

After a specified period of time the report is presented and discussed at a plenary session of the Commission. After the discussion a decision is made as a result of secret voting if the accreditation is to be granted or not. It is also possible to postpone the decision for a period of one year in order to complete the documentation or to take up some actions in the unit in order to adjust its offer to the standards.

The evaluated unit has the right to make reservations and to appeal to the Commission against the inspection and the report by the Evaluation Team, or against postponing the accreditation decision. In case of non-granting the accreditation the appeal should be made to the Conference of Rectors of Polish Technical Universities not later than 30 days after receiving the information about decision. The accreditation process and the documentation are confidential, whereas the accreditation decision is public.

The Commission hands diplomas to the accredited unit during a ceremony to which special guests are invited. The first accreditation ceremony during which certificates were handed to the units whose study programmes were assessed by the Commission was held in "Hold Pruski" chamber of Sukiennice, Krakow, on 4 March 2003.

## **7.2 The Achievements of the Accreditation Commission of the Technical Universities**

After setting up formal-organisational foundations in 2002 the Commission launched accreditation procedure for 12 study areas.

Launching the accreditation procedure meant appointing 12 Expert Groups, causing the approval of accreditation standards and starting procedures for particular movers. 30 Evaluation Teams inspecting 45 units were appointed. Altogether 120 experts trained at special seminars

participated in the works of Expert Groups and Evaluation Teams.

At its plenary sessions in January and February 2003 the Commission made resolutions to grant accreditation to 29 units (25 of which obtained it for the longest possible time, i.e. five years). Nine applications were decided to be amended, other 18 applications are being proceeded now.

## **8 The Summary**

The Accreditation Commissions connected with a particular type of university were established at the request of the academic society, who assumed that such activity is needed and necessary. Binary (0 to 1) grading system used by the Commissions enables introducing high educational standards. Universities seem to be aware of the benefits resulting from the accreditation process. Of course there can always be a risk that in consequence universities will split in two groups: an exclusive club with the universities which have the accreditation and a group of schools which will consider themselves rejected. Thus it can be seen how responsible the task of the expert groups setting up accreditation standards for particular study areas is. After a few years of experience it can be stated that the danger has been avoided. The experts were able to balance a proper level of requirements.

It has to be remembered that the main objective of accreditation is not a single action taken to obtain a certificate. It is to create a process of constant quality improvement and setting up mechanisms for its assurance. Therefore the standards have to be high but possible to stand up to in the real life, so that they stimulate progress and at the same time are a subject to continuous modifications.

The State Accreditation Commission has a lot of work to do. As there are about 380 universities to overview, the total number of necessary accreditation visits reaches many thousands. And it is not the only task of the Commission. Applications for establishing new schools are still pouring in. During the coming several months the study programmes taught at the vocational high schools must be assigned to the appropriate study areas. There are over 100 schools like these, and each of them offers a few study areas.

The State Accreditation Commission is facing a huge task of making order in the educational market in Poland. It is the only institution that can eliminate from the market very weak schools or just the schools deceiving their students. Besides clearly educational matters the Commission also controls legal aspects of schools' operation. Unfortunately these legal conditions in Poland are not always precise and enabling making quick and clear-cut decisions. The Commission's activities will surely radically influence ordering this sphere of Polish higher education.

Yet, first of all it should be remembered that neither the institutional nor the accreditation coming from the academic society (a reward for excellent quality of education) will

substitute for the most important thing: internal mechanisms and systems of quality assurance. The only way to achieve this aim is to convince all participants of the educational process, i.e. staff, students, parents and future employers, that the problem of quality must be treated seriously, and that it is an indispensable element of the education process.

The units which have already been granted accreditation as well as these which are still facing the procedure have to remember that the accreditation process will be permanently present in the higher education system. Accreditation is not granted once and for all. Units will be subjects to constant evaluation by the academic society commissions, the State Accreditation Commission, and in future by trade associations (which already takes place in developed countries). Thus self-assessment reports and reports by the accreditation teams have to be analysed, and continuous quality assurance activities have to be taken in order to fulfil certain standards and to ensure the highest level of education.

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## B. Macukow

Bohdan Macukow was graduated in 1969 from the Warsaw University of Technology where he currently holds the position of full professor. Currently he is also the Coordinator of the Quality of Education and the System of Studies at the Warsaw University of Technology. Since 1994 he has been involved in several Tempus Projects devoted to organization of engineering programs taught in English, and the development of the Internal Quality Assurance and Assessment Systems. He is the member of State Accreditation Commission.

