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An Opinion Expressed in a Debate on the Dilemmas Posed by the Quality of Polish University and College Training

Abstract

The article constitutes an opinion expressed in a debate, held in various circles, concerning the quality of training in Polish institutions of higher education, with reference to the selected documents of the European Union. It presents a few issues connected with the factors determining the quality of training, and indicates a number of dilemmas related to their application.

Key words: *quality of training, cultural wealth, a knowledge society, education, university, European Community action programmes, academic teacher*

Introduction

Contemporary European societies have been witnessing and participating in numerous multifaceted integration processes. It is worth mentioning that the issue of international integration and cooperation, also on the cultural plane, has been examined in the works of Florian Znaniecki, who focused on the benefits of international cooperation. (cf.: Turowski, 1999). The 21st century is undoubtedly a period of great challenges to education, which has been given a key role in the process of forming new societies. Education is a constituent of cultural wealth related to acquiring habits, skills and behavioural patterns, in the process of socialization and forming elite groups of higher social status and having better education, which facilitate reproduction of elite positions and symbolize the elite group affiliation. It has been emphasized in the documents of the Lisbon Strategy

that education is one of the greatest investments in human capital. Knowledge acts as a driving force for cultural, economic and social development of particular countries and continents. A few years ago the European Commission published the White Paper on education and training (1995), which was the event of crucial importance. The paper “Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society” became a very important document regulating the problems which European education had to face in the era of global information order. The seasonal report of the European Commission and Council “Education and Training 2010”, accepted at the European Council summit in Brussels in 2004, underlines the fact that investing in education plays as important a role in determining development as capital investments. As a full member of the European Union, Poland has been trying to implement gradually the common education policy aimed, among others, at developing competence and skills essential for a knowledge society. (cf.: e.g. Mazińska, 2004)

Assessing the quality of training by the National Accreditation Commission

A very important and extremely positive phenomenon, which has occurred in recent years, is an increase in the level of education of our society. Since 1988 the number of people with higher education has increased by 52% and the number of people with secondary education-by 23%. The education level of rural population of our country is still significantly lower compared with the education level of the urban population (approximately 20%) (cf: e.g. Kwiecieński, 2004). A growth of educational aspirations and an increase in motivation for learning has been observed especially among people in the 25 to 35 age bracket. In this group 18.6% of people have higher education. A low percentage of people with a low level of education can be observed among people above the age of 55 (Operational Programme “Education and competencies”, cf. also: Denek, 2005).

The Act on Higher Education of 1990 provided the legal basis for establishing non-state institutions of higher education, thus creating new possibilities for training. In the academic year 2004/2005 1,904,014 students were enrolled in all types of higher education institutions, this total number including 558,291 students (which constitutes 29.3% of the total number of students) in non-state institutions of higher education. In the last ten years institutions of higher education in Poland were oriented towards mass training and education. In order to encourage the sustainable development of higher education, a system for evaluating the quality of training has been created. In 1997 an Agreement of Polish Universities concern-

ing the Quality of Education, amended in 1999, was signed. It is a non-state organization incorporating all the Polish universities interested in providing high quality training. The agreement aims at creating programme evaluation procedures, according to those of the European Union; upgrading of the quality of education; promoting high-quality courses of studies; creating favourable conditions for students' mobility. On January 31, 1998 the University Accreditation Commission (UAC) was appointed. As a result of its activity, in 2005 263 higher education institutions were granted the certificate of high quality training. The UAC has created general standards essential for the accreditation system. An institution of higher education which applies for accreditation is obliged to pay a fee of PLN 12,000 (The UAC Diectory, 2005, p. 9–13).

In 2002, in accordance with the Act of 20 July 2001 amending the existing Higher Education Act, the act on higher vocational schools and the act amending some other acts, a State Accreditation Committee was established. The main tasks of the State Accreditation Committee include: evaluating the quality of education in particular areas of study in all Polish institutions of higher education; evaluating as well as carrying out control of compliance with the legal requirements for offering areas of study in the institutions of higher education; preparing evaluations of all applications to establish an institution of higher education; granting the right to establish and offer particular areas of study and levels of training in an institution of higher education; preparing evaluations of all applications to establish an external unit of an institution; granting the right to establish and offer new areas of study, different from those specified in the regulation of the Minister of National Education. It should be added at this point that in the years 2002–2003, 210 different areas of study, offered by state and non-state institutions of higher education, were evaluated by the State Accreditation Committee, of which 70% were awarded a positive rating, 25% – conditional and 5% – negative rating (ibid. p.23; cf. e.g. Guz, 1999).

The specificity of the functioning system of a university, an institution of higher education

Among many institutions of higher education, a university is a very specific place. It offers multidisciplinary training to its students, conducts extensive multidisciplinary research in the field of science and humanities, preserves cultural heritage and maintains contacts with international research centres. A university prepares young people for conducting research and provides them with training and qualifications essential for certain professions. “It should remain a source able to satisfy a desire for knowledge, of those more numerous people whose inquiring minds give a mean-

ing to their lives.” A university is an exceptional cultural and scientific centre which should be open to all, and its fundamental mission should be constant participation in debates on the concept and future of society – as it is said in the Report to UNESCO of the International Commission of Education for the twenty-first Century. (Report to UNESCO, 1998, p.140–141). Development of a knowledge society is determined by scientific achievements, transformed by means of the system of education; development and application of modern computer science; and implementation of research results in industry and services. However, the ideal model of a university, mentioned above, encourages reflection on its functioning in the contemporary Polish reality. The profound transformations which occurred in Poland led to specific consequences not only in the education system but also in the functioning of institutions of higher education, including universities, which creates a number of new dilemmas (cf. e.g. Żechowska, 1999). It is then well-grounded to focus our attention on a few issues which are of great importance to the quality of education and training in universities and other types of higher education institutions, especially in the context of the Lisbon Strategy, within the framework of which improving of the quality and effectiveness of education and training systems in the European Union countries is the main strategic objective to achieve. The goal has been thoroughly described in other documents i.e. “Future objectives of education and training systems”, accepted at the Stockholm European Council meeting in March 2001; and “The Detailed Work Programme for Education and Training Systems in Europe”, proposed at the Barcelona European Council in March 2002 (Mazińska, 2004; p. 13, cf. also: Kwiatkowski 2006). It should be added that the quality issues have aroused the interest of other disciplines of science, and the greatest number of concepts have been formulated on the basis of economic science. It seems that the most useful of all definitions is T.Kotarbiński’s praxeological concept of quality, defined as a set of diverse properties governing the suitability of the product (service) for satisfying society’s needs in accordance with its (the product’s) purpose. (Górniewicz, 2002, p. 38; cf. also: Polańska, 2003).

Scientific research is closely related to the modernization processes which take place in the sphere of economy and culture, and they condition civilizational progress. The fundamental and thorny problem contemporary institutions of higher education are confronted with is low state expenditure on research, especially one conducted in the field of arts and humanities. Not going into details about a distinctive character of natural and social sciences, it is worth referring at this point to S.Ossowski’s deliberations on natural science patterns in confrontation with the peculiarities of social sciences. According to S.Ossowski’s approach, social phenomena are culturally conditioned, they deneutralise time-space factors, historicise data, thus reducing the generality of the process of inductive concluding. (Ossowski,

1962). S. Ossowski's discussion refers to sociology, but provokes reflection also among representatives of other social sciences, including pedagogy, the example of which may be a phenomenon of "converting" the publication research achievements (monographic works and articles presenting the results of scientific research) into point scores, in accordance with a scale suggested by the Scientific Research Committee, which is essential in applying for the title of an associate professor in the particular institution of higher education.

The most important questions concerning financing institutions of higher education are related to the ways of raising funds and using them effectively, and to consolidating financial resources and using them for the purpose of improving the quality of training and education. At the meeting in Barcelona in 2002, the European Council agreed that the overall spending on research and development in Europe should be increased with the aim approaching 3% of GDP. Against the background of social and economic changes, aimed at local and regional development, the question of putting the problem of institutions of higher education within the framework of regional and local needs and activities seems to be crucial. There is also a need for popularization of research through cooperation between institutions of higher education and entrepreneurs pursuing economic activity, and the question which needs to be addressed is one of the kinds of action to be taken in order to utilize fully the research findings in the field of economy and social life. As it has been put forward in a document "The Role of the universities in the Europe of Knowledge", in the Member States of the European Union there has been a limited access to the information concerning commercialization of research, conducted in institutions of higher education, which makes it difficult to evaluate the extent of the application of research outcome in industry sectors. (The Bologna Process, 2004, p.73, 81–83; cf. also: Radziewicz-Winnicki, 2001).

The answers to the questions raised above are not easy or clear-cut. Admittedly, institutions of higher education in our country suffer from the effects of low expenditure on research (statutory research; individual and team research), but they also function in the regions that are demographically, socially and culturally diverse, which certainly creates diversity when it comes to opportunities for cooperation with various entrepreneurs, and builds certain consciousness and bureaucratic barriers which increase the gap between science and social life. What I mean by the consciousness barriers are the stereotypes of the previous epoch, perpetuated by both groups and individuals, about the ideological basis of the functioning system of economic, educational and social institutions. As well as all kinds of lawful rules and principles of human activity, culture constitutes also a set of ideas which shape the way of thinking of an individual, a group or society. Therefore, it is not without reason to emphasize the fact that education is important for the

required forms of functioning within society, directed towards modernization processes (Radziewicz-Winnicki, 2004, p. 28–44); and, generally speaking, for establishing civil communities (cf. e.g. Potulicka, 2005; cf. Donati, 1999).

European Community action programmes and international cooperation

Many common programmes have been run in Europe, involving the objectives and principles of cooperation aimed at enhancing the quality of education in its broad meaning. Many academic centres in Poland have been conducting international cooperation, directed at common research work¹, publishing activity², student exchange programmes and short-term traineeships for academic teachers. This cooperation is based on bilateral agreements and, which has become frequent in recent years, participation in international research projects financed by the European Union funds.

It is worth mentioning that the objectives of the European Union education policy are pursued through international cooperation programmes “Socrates” and “Leonardo da Vinci”, which were established by the decisions of the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union in 1995, with their second phase adopted for the period of 2000–2006. The legislative basis for the programmes is provided in articles 149 and 150 of the “Treaty establishing the European Community”. The “Socrates” programme refers to education as a broad process taking place within all social groups, and at all levels; and the main objectives of the programme are (Mazińska, 2004, p. 51):

¹ As a representative of the Faculty of Social Pedagogy at the University of Silesia, and of the academic community of social educationalists, I would like to provide an example of an All-Poland Science Conference, entitled “Social Pedagogy in Poland after the year 1989 – science transformations, international participation, thematic range of research work”, organized by the Social Pedagogy Team of PAN (Polish Academy of Science) Committee on Pedagogical Sciences in Gorzów Wlkp. on April 25–26, 2006 (the Chairman of the Team is Andrzej Radziewicz-Winnicki, full professor, PhD, habilitation doctor). A considerable part of the conference debate was devoted to international cooperation conducted by social pedagogy representatives from various academic centres in Poland.

² An example may be a quarterly published in English – “The Educational Review” – by Adam Marszałek Publishing House (The editor-in-chief is Stanisław Juszczyk, full professor, PhD, habilitation doctor, the Dean of the Faculty of Pedagogy and Psychology at the University of Silesia). The quarterly is the effect of common work and cooperation between the University of Silesia (the Faculty of Pedagogy and Psychology), the University of Ostrava in Ostrava (Pedagogical Faculty), the Czech Republic, and Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica (Faculty of Education), the Slovak Republic.

- to enhance quality of education and expand areas of study,
- to promote a European dimension in education,
- to implement the idea of lifelong learning,
- to show respect for the multicultural character of Europe, as a principle of active participation in its cultural wealth
- to promote equal opportunities for both sexes, unfavoured individuals and the weakest social groups,
- to implement modern information and communication technologies,
- to promote knowledge of foreign languages

The “Socrates” programme incorporates six subprogrammes such as: The “Comenius” programme (primary and secondary education), the “Erasmus” programme (higher education), the “Grundtvig” programme (adult education), the “Minerva” programme (information and communication technology in education), the “Lingua” programme (education in foreign languages), the “Arion” programme (study visits for educational specialists and decision makers). The main objective of the “Erasmus” programme is to enhance the quality of education in institutions of higher education, and to strengthen their European dimension. The institutions of higher education participating in the programme have an opportunity to accomplish many tasks concerning: 3-month to 1-year student exchange programmes; academic teacher exchange programmes, aimed at conducting teaching activity; adoption of the European ECTS system; drawing up new teaching programmes in cooperation with international partner institutions; organizing a series of teaching activities for groups of international students, drawn up and conducted by a group of international academic teachers; participating in Erasmus Thematic Network (*ibid.* p. 53). This broad spectrum of various programmes provides new cooperation opportunities for students and academic teachers in both public and non-public higher education institutions. The area and range of international cooperation is the key element of the evaluation of the particular organizational unit in the higher education institution, and of the assessment of individual achievements of its teaching and research staff, in the process of applying for research degrees. Effectiveness of scientific research is evaluated by European, not regional or local, standards. There are a few crucial factors which contribute to the fact that the challenges which universities and other institutions of higher education have to face, reach outside national borders (The Bologna Process, 2004, pp. 84–85). It is, above all, the European labour-market opening and facilitating recognition of qualifications within the framework of the “Erasmus-Naric” programme (National Recognition and Information Centre). “Naric” is a network of National Information Centres, created in 1984. It aims at collecting and providing information concerning the academic recognition of diplomas and

certificates, for the purpose of continuing the course of study (the so-called academic recognition, Mazińska, 2004, p. 59).

The Bologna Process documents emphasize the problem of “brain drain”, the phenomenon currently occurring in our Polish reality, which consequently results in the outflow of the best students (graduates) and junior research workers, who are offered better salaries and better didactic and research work conditions in the countries outside Poland. The problem is not unfamiliar, but it is being deepened by increasing unemployment within the group of people with higher education degrees, and the prospects of obtaining legal work opportunities in many countries of the European Union.

Academic teacher in the contemporary educational reality

Contemporary universities and other institutions of higher education in Poland cope with numerous problems, as it is commonly known, not only financial ones, which in many cases would require gradual, well-thought-out and realistic system solutions. However, initiating a multifaceted discussion on the quality of education and training in the institutions of higher education, it is worth recalling the fundamental values/features of a university, which have been defined by J.Brzeziński as autonomy, diversity, complementary character of research and teaching, and truth (Szymański, 1999, p. 70–71). A separate analysis of each value/feature may be carried out. In 1937, in the article “Social roles of scholars and historical features of knowledge”, F. Znaniński presented an interesting study of truth, arousing the interest of a contemporary reader. In his study Znaniński analyzes also the social roles of scholars, emphasizing the fact that it is the “scholar’s” special responsibility to “cultivate” knowledge i.e. to perform certain functions aimed at retaining knowledge systems, for his own benefit as well as that of society, in the way which would prove accessible to other people; transmitting knowledge systems to people through teaching and publications; making critical assessment of knowledge systems; defending knowledge systems against negative criticism voiced by others; incorporating new truths into knowledge systems, and eliminating the old ones; improving and restructuring knowledge systems; designing new knowledge systems. F.Znaniński has thus defined the social role of a scholar, for whom “cultivating knowledge, according to the definition presented above, is a separate social function (yet not necessarily the only one) appointed by society, and in fact performed by the scholar himself. (Szacki, 1984, p. 537). The term “scholar”, used in the deliberations and discussions of the above-mentioned distinguished Polish sociologist, no longer appears in the contemporary reality of academic life. The most popular expressions it has been

replaced with are: a didactic and research worker or an academic teacher. The term “didactic and research worker” comprises two fundamental tasks/expectations, which constitute the social role of the worker. The expression “academic teacher” seems to be a broader notion, denoting tasks/expectations related to the didactic and educational process which takes place in an institution of higher education,; and to conducting scientific research, the area of which is determined by the specific function and character of the higher education institution, and individual interests in the particular disciplines and competences. As a consequence of contemporary transformations which occurred in the functioning system of a higher education institution, concerning the area of research, the teaching standards which have to be met, attempts made by academic environment to establish high quality of training, and the mass character of education, the scope of tasks and requirements, set by social environment and attributed to the social role of an academic teacher, has also changed. An academic teacher employed by an institution of higher education is obliged to conduct research and didactic and educational activity, and to participate in organizational activity of the particular unit. However, establishing non-public institutions of higher education and offering low salaries to academic teachers, especially to junior research workers employed in their home higher education institutions, lead to mobility among academic teachers, who seek additional employment in non-public institutions of higher education, mainly those offering the areas of study highly popular among secondary school graduates. Pedagogy is an example of such a popular faculty. The confrontation of low salaries, offered to junior research workers, with the obligation to apply for research degrees (conducting research, working on a habilitation thesis, publishing activity, participating in science conferences, etc.) arouses the feeling of discomfort, which affects fulfilling the professional role of an academic teacher. The Act of 27 July 2005 – Law on Higher Education – determines the specific length of employment for the rank of a lecturer and junior lecturer. It should be added that, under the regulations regarding higher education, academic teachers undergo evaluation every four years, in which all aspects of their research, didactic and organizational activity are taken into consideration. One of the elements of training quality evaluation system, used in the institutions of higher education, is a teacher assessment questionnaire for students, i.e. students carry out evaluation of the quality of teaching. The assessment results are of great importance for accreditation inspection visits. Each organizational unit designs its own teacher assessment questionnaire (cf.: e.g. Cizkowicz, 2003). The most frequently used term is “evaluation”, which might refer to specific classes, the process of training in the course of studies, or to the quality of training in general, taking into account all didactic and also non-didactic details (buildings and didactic base, organization of teaching, libraries and their fittings and supplies,

access to computers, etc.). The term “evaluation” is considered equivalent to assessment, testing, valuing. Initiating the discussion on evaluation of the quality of training in higher education institutions a few questions should be asked. First, what is the purpose of teaching quality evaluation? It is aimed basically at improving the quality of teaching, with respect to both factual knowledge being demonstrated and methodology of teaching, the main purpose of which is to provide a student with appropriate knowledge and skills. The range of knowledge and skills includes the description of a graduate profile in the given faculty or specialization. Second, what should actually be evaluated by students? Should it be the content of teaching, the way classes are conducted (i.e. academic teacher’s competence- knowledge and skills), or should students evaluate the person conducting the classes (paying special attention to the person’s individual features of character such as punctuality, conscientiousness, kindness, sociability, diligence, etc.)? Perhaps all the aspects should be taken into consideration. This is what generates discussion. It seems that the answers to the questions addressed above are extremely important since they provide a certain basis for designing a student’s evaluation questionnaire. The next question is: for whom is the evaluation of the teaching quality made? Is it only for the Accreditation Commission? It seems that the evaluation results should be presented to the target person, one being evaluated by students, for the purpose of improving the quality of teaching. It should be emphasized that the best way to complement the student’s evaluation of teaching quality would be to carry out, by independent research and didactic workers, a series of inspection visits to classes conducted by junior research and didactic workers, i.e. lecturers and junior lecturers (who are very often authorized by the faculty council to give lectures and seminars). On the other hand however, the idea worth taking into account is to provide junior research workers with opportunities of participating in the lectures and seminars conducted by professors, in order to let them draw from the best of the patterns.

A different issue is the process of evaluation of the quality of professional training in institutions of higher education. Its important element would be employers’ opinion on the level of professional training attained by higher institution graduates (the essential knowledge and skills they have been provided with), and the expectations defined by employers. (Górnikiewicz, 2002).

Conclusion

It is impossible to name and analyse all the variables determining high quality of education and training in institutions of higher education, but they should certainly be discussed and examined in academic environment and in higher

education departments, for the purpose of developing a quality model for education and training in Polish institutions of higher education, with reference to European standards of education. It is also necessary to undertake research into the selected variables determining the quality of education and training, and to develop certain standardized tools (e.g. the student's evaluation questionnaire) used in the research into some of these variables. Some issues related to the system of functioning of an institution of higher education, which are essential for the quality of education and training, require working out global system solutions.

Translated by Iwona Mrozińska

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