



Poland – Assuring and strengthening the quality of (private) higher education

*One of twelve case studies
produced as part of the
project on Structural
Reform in Higher Education
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Table of contents

Introduction	4
Poland – Assuring and strengthening the quality of (private) higher education	5
Introduction to the structural reform and its main goals	5
Context and background to the reform	6
Design process for the reform	6
Policy instruments used	7
Implementation of the reform	7
Monitoring, evaluation and feedback	9
Important changes in context for the reform	9
Achievements and effects	9
Summary	10
Interviewees	12
References	12

Introduction

This case study is part of the “Structural Higher Education Reform – Design and Evaluation” project, commissioned by the European Commission (EAC/31/2014). The main objective of this project – carried out by the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS), University of Twente, the Netherlands, and the Centre for Higher Education Governance Ghent (CHEGG), Ghent University, Belgium - is to investigate policy processes related to the design, implementation, and evaluation of structural reforms of higher education systems. The focus is on government-initiated reform processes that were intended to change the higher education landscape, with the following questions foremost: What kind of goals were envisaged with the structural reform? How was the structural reform planned and implemented? What have been the achievements of the structural reforms? How can these achievements be explained in terms of policy process factors?

Three types of reform were distinguished: reforms designed to increase horizontal differentiation (developing or strengthening new types of higher education institutions such as the creation of a professional higher education sector), reforms designed to increase vertical differentiation (bringing about quality or prestige differences between higher education institutions, e.g. by creating centres of excellence) and reforms designed to increase interrelationships between institutions (supporting cooperation and coordination among institutions, forming alliances or mergers). In total, structural reforms in twelve different countries (eleven in Europe, one in Canada) were investigated: Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Canada (Alberta), Croatia, Denmark, Finland, France, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Spain, United Kingdom (Wales). The twelve case studies – for ease of reference published as separate documents - all follow the same logic and are presented in a similar format, with sections relating to the reform and its context, policy goals, policy design, policy instruments, policy implementation, policy evaluation and goal achievement.

Poland – Assuring and strengthening the quality of (private) higher education

Marek Kwiek, Dominik Antonowicz & Don F. Westerheijden¹

Introduction to the structural reform and its main goals

In 2002 the law establishing the State Accreditation Committee (the PKA, since 2011, the Polish Accreditation Commission) came into force. Increased state control over the quality of higher education through accreditation had been discussed in previous years in a largely non-controversial process. The operational goal of the reform introducing the State Accreditation Committee which is the subject of this case study was to abolish low-quality study programmes in private higher education institutions. The strategic goal was to increase the quality of both public and private higher education offered in the country.

After the fall of communism in 1989 there was much unmet demand for higher education in Poland. Private higher education, allowed by the 1990 higher education law (one of the first post-communist laws), added much to the supply of higher education, but the diversity in terms of quality was large. Public sector professors ‘moonlighted’ in private higher education institutions—their low public salaries made second (and sometimes third) jobs well-nigh a necessity—and a short-term profit focus among some founders of private higher education institutions was another contributory factor.

A ‘mushrooming’ period followed. In 1998/1999, the private sector accommodated 25 percent of enrolments, especially, although not only, through fee-based part-time study programmes. When Poland entered a ‘post-transformation’ stage, around 1995, worries about the low quality of provision in parts of the private (as well as public) sector surfaced. In 1997 the Act on Higher Vocational Schools was passed, foreseeing public vocational higher education institutions, which curbed some of the expansion of the private sector. Until 2002 licensing of private institutions and (liberal) oversight of their activities was the responsibility of the Ministry.

The legal control and the supervision mechanisms at the state’s disposal were weak (the relevant formulation in the act and in lower-level regulations were general and often ambiguous), the ministry was under-staffed (six people in the Ministry, including three part-timers, dealt with the private sector in 1999-2000), and, technically speaking, its physical access to, and its power to impose decisions on, private higher education institutions were very limited. The existing representative body of the (public-sector) academic community, RGSW (The Main Council for Higher Education), created in 1985 while Poland was still under communism, was unable – technically, legally, and in terms of infrastructure, staff and resources – to provide support to the Ministry to control and supervise the private sector. No other institutions were legally authorised to assess the quality of education offered in the sector (or any other dimension of its functioning).

¹ This summary was drafted by Don F. Westerheijden, Center for Higher Education Policy Studies at the University of Twente, the Netherlands, on the basis of the (longer) case study report written by Marek Kwiek, Center for Public Policy Studies, University of Poznan, Poland and Dominik Antonowicz, Department of Sociology, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Torun, Poland.

Around the time of the reform, Poland was busy gearing up in all sectors of public life for accession to the EU, which took place in 2004.

The scale of growth of the private sector, the *de facto* business orientation of a large part of it (despite being legally non-profit institutions: they were founded by individuals, associations, and foundations), and its determination to expand at all costs, and in many cases to make money at all costs, including partly outside existing legal frameworks, took Polish policymakers by surprise. This is shown by both the media's response and by the NIK's [The Supreme Audit Office] report of 2000 on the lack of state supervision of the private sector. From around 1993 onwards some public and well-intentioned private higher education institutions were engaged in voluntary accreditation in some sectors (e.g. business studies).

Context and background to the reform

In 2002, when the reform started, there were 377 higher education institutions (252 private and 125 public). The total number of students was 1.8 million (1.3 million in the public sector and 0.5 million, or more than one quarter, in the private sector). Most growth in the 1990s took place in the private sector. A single new private institution was opened in 1990, 11 opened in 1992, 19 opened in both 1993 and 1994, 25 opened in 1995, 29 in 96 and 32 in 1997. Growth continued right up until the reform: from 174 in 1999, the number reached 252 in 2002. Of these 252 private institutions only 70 had the right to confer master degrees, the others were limited to conferring bachelor degrees. The gross enrolment rate in the same period was also growing rapidly: from 13 percent in 1990 to 41 percent in 2000, 44 percent in 2001 and 46 percent in 2002. The three most popular study programmes in 2002 cumulatively housed about a half the student body (49 percent): administration and economics (25 percent of students), social sciences (13 percent) and education (11 percent). There were 7.600 international students and 31.000 doctoral students. The three major types of higher education institutions were universities (527.000 students), followed by schools of economics (390.000) and polytechnics (344.000). Less than a half of all students were enrolled in full-time studies (46 percent); the remainder were enrolled in part-time studies (GUS 2003). Full-time students in the public sector in the period 1989-2014 were publicly funded and part-time students were fee-based. In contrast, all students in the private sector, regardless of the mode of studies, paid fees.

Design process for the reform

Originally, the idea of state accreditation came from governmental and some academic actors: the new ministry in the Buzek government, the Conference of Rectors of Public Universities (KRUP) and a group of reformers inside higher education since the early 1990s had focused on the idea of (various kinds of) voluntary academic accreditation, pioneered by accreditation in business studies (FPAKE). Rectors from the private sector, through the Convent of Rectors of Private Institutions (KRUN), were generally supportive of the idea. The better part of the private sector, involved in the promotion of its long-term interests, believed that the PKA with new tools would be able to clean up the sector and get rid of its worst parts, as well as focus on the quality of the public sector.

Powerful impetuses for change came from the NIK report mentioned above and from an OECD review of the higher education sector (Fulton et al. 2007).

The actors involved shared similar goals – to introduce state accreditation across the whole higher education sector and to end the powerlessness of the state vis-à-vis the private sector – but maintained slightly divergent beliefs and interests. The reform focused on accreditation, a relatively minor technical theme, instead of focusing on the larger issues publicly discussed, such as underfunding of academic research or multiple employment of academics. This reduced the scope of public controversies: accreditation was a well-known theme and had very positive connotations with increasing teaching quality. Very importantly, higher education reforms were not politicized by the political parties, neither in the Parliament and its Commission on Education, Science and Youth nor outside in the national political discourse.

Compared with later policy processes, this one was not very open to stakeholders other than the ministry and academics (as opposed to the 2009-2012 reforms when a document with the ministry's 'Assumptions' was subjected to public debate and the role of other external stakeholders was larger than ever in the post-1989 period). In broad terms, just a single option was considered: to introduce effective mechanisms of state accreditation and to establish a new state accreditation body in order to control the quality of higher education, especially but not exclusively in the private sector. The options in the policy process were related to the technical details rather than the substance of this structural reform.

Policy instruments used

The main policy instrument used was regulation. First, the PKA was regulated and funded (through programme funding) by the state. Regular, cyclical accreditation of higher education institutions and study programmes through the PKA was introduced. This was the core of the amendment of the higher education law in 2001. Second, the PKA established its bylaws and standards governing the accreditation processes. As an additional policy instrument, information by the PKA on its standards, criteria and procedures formed the major information instrument in this case.

Implementation of the reform

The actors involved in the implementation process were the PKA and the Ministry. The PKA started its operation in 2002, with large-scale accreditation procedures applied to groups of study programmes in individual institutions, both public and private. More specifically, from among 599 candidates to be PKA members, the (new) Minister herself chose 70. PKA members came from both sectors, which interviewees believed to be a symbolic levelling of the playing field.

Academic institutions, both public and private, were involved in the reform as the objects of PKA activities: there were initially fears of the PKA and its methods of control. But institutions had no choice but to cooperate with the PKA in seeking accreditation for their study programmes. Resistance or reluctance were not possible as the PKA was operating under very strict rules and very tight deadlines. Academics were involved in the implementation only as data providers for selected study programmes; departments and faculties were fully mobilised when self-assessments were being prepared and when actual PKA site visits were taking place. No other major actors were involved.

The legally binding targets were very tight. For instance, the target to process within the first four months about 100 applications to open new private higher

education institutions, and to start the accreditation of several hundred study programmes in 2002 and 2003). There were no delays in the implementation period. The conditions of the reform were not changed in the first years of PKA operation; changes came later when the institution was evolving, especially after 2005. The PKA has evolved gradually in the thirteen years since its founding, and there have been no fundamental changes in its operations.

Public and scholarly interventions on the subject referred to 'mistrust' and 'fear' of the new mechanisms. At the street-level of academics, new mechanisms led to new administrative burdens about which academics voiced their concerns. So the direct implementers (70 PKA members and 500 PKA associated experts) complied with the new mechanisms, and those affected – i.e. academics – had no choice but to comply, albeit with some fears of new administrative burdens and some mistrust of state intervention in purely academic affairs, possibly leading to decreasing academic and institutional autonomy.

However, with time, and especially in the 2010s, the PKA was increasingly both less able to use its mechanisms across the whole system (and focused more on the public sector) and less able to verify the complicated bureaucratic reality presented in official documents submitted to it. A major line of criticism of the PKA in recent years has been that it was not able to compare the actual institutional reality of the private sector with the 'photo shopped' image shown in documents submitted to the PKA.

Since 2012, the PKA has been working through assessments of study programmes and, on a much smaller scale, assessments of institutions. So far, the PKA has issued 6,249 study programme assessments for about 3,000 study programmes (PKA database, accessed October 6, 2015). Study programmes in public institutions are assessed much more often than those in the private sector. Outstanding and positive assessments are given more often in the public sector, and negative assessments occur more often in the private sector. So far, the PKA has issued 193 negative assessments, and 296 study programmes were withdrawn from the procedure. Since 2012, the PKA has suspended 83 study programmes in 56 institutions, the vast majority in the private sector (70 in 44 private institutions and 13 in 12 public institutions; Górnjak 2015: 96). The PKA assessment system has been clogging up: the number of assessments per year has been declining in the last five years, and, as a result, the number of non-assessed study programmes whose previous assessment has expired is on the rise: in 2010-2013, the total number was about 400 (Górnjak 2015: 97). Since 2012, the PKA has conducted 140 institutional assessments (131 in the public sector and 9 in the private sector); institutional assessments are conducted for those institutions in which the majority of study programmes have been assessed previously (a 'second-stage assessment'). The second-stage assessment is focused more on doctoral teaching, while study programme assessments are focused on masters and bachelor teaching. Because of the clogging-up of the first level, the second level assessments are not performed on a scale necessary to keep up with the system's needs.

So while the initial impact of the PKA on the quality of private sector institutions was considerable, with the passage of time, its role is reducing and its real influence on the functioning of the private sector appears to have been smaller than expected in 2002.

Monitoring, evaluation and feedback

There was a monitoring and reporting system in place: the PKA published reports and reported directly to the Ministry. The PKA was also assessed internationally by ENQA in 2008. Higher education institutions had no reporting obligations about their progress in the implementation of quality improvement recommendations to either the PKA or the Ministry.

The PKA closely monitored its own activities and reported them annually to the Ministry and periodically to the public; the Ministry monitored the PKA and reported the overall progress of ongoing smaller-scale reforms, including the accreditation-related structural reform. There seem to have been no indicators for measuring the strategic outcomes and progress of the structural reform, though the number of institutions and programmes accredited and not accredited was an easily visible indicator of PKA's activity.

Important changes in context for the reform

The demographic decline which was only raised as a minor issue in the 1997-2001 discussions about the shape of higher education, as well as about the future of its private part, has more recently become a reality affecting every aspect of higher education funding and governance, and has changed the public-private dynamics in the system. As a consequence, the Polish system has contracted (Kwiek 2013, Antonowicz and Godlewski 2011). The number of private higher education institutions has declined, and the private sector has contracted faster than the public sector because it is fee-based while full-time studies in the public sector are publicly funded. Total student numbers decreased from 1.9 million in 2006 to 1.5 million in 2013, and the private sector enrolments decreased from 660.000 in 2007 to 399.000 in 2013 (over 30 percent); in the same period, enrolments in the public sector decreased from 1.3 million to 1.2 million (less than 10 percent) (GUS 2014). The number of private institutions fell from 330 in 2009 to 287 in 2015. In the register of private institutions in the Ministry, there are 379 private institutions in total, of which 287 are active (October 2015), 52 have closed down, 32 are in the process of closing down and eight have merged. The contraction era is expected to last for at least another decade as a result of fundamental, demographic factors.

There were no other major external events affecting the implementation process: Poland was not, for instance, affected substantially by the financial crisis; it experienced cumulated growth in the 2008-2014 period of 24 percent, the highest in the EU. There were several new governments and ministers in the 2002-2014 period but the structural reform was not stopped and its direction was not changed. Obligatory state accreditation became a highly institutionalised element of the Polish higher education landscape.

Achievements and effects

Most of the operational goals were partly achieved as a result of the reform policy. The main achievements were:

- A culture of quality was introduced into both public and private sectors, although there are no direct measures to demonstrate this. Indirect indications include: improving student/staff ratios, increased per student funding, private institutions ranked in the prestigious Financial Times ranking of European business schools, and the multiple employment of academics is no longer widespread.

- The teaching quality was increased, especially in the private sector. Private sector 'affairs' common in the late 1990s, before the PKA was formed, were seen with decreasing frequency in the press.
- The state regained its authority and introduced more effective mechanisms to control – to some extent – the quality in the private sector which until 2002 had been beyond any state (ministerial) control.

The major strategic goal – to change the landscape of Polish higher education through increasing the quality of higher education offered in both public and private sectors – was partially achieved. The impact of the PKA on the system has been declining with the passage of time, following the clogging up of its mechanisms due to its inability to conduct all of the assessments required.

Unintended effects of the use of selected policy instruments included:

- The growing bureaucratisation of the accreditation procedures led to defence mechanisms on the part of private (and possibly public) sector institutions: differences existed between the ideal depiction of teaching quality 'on paper' (often prepared by specialised legal firms) and its 'reality' on the ground level, which is hard to assess during PKA's short site visits.
- The gradual decline of voluntary discipline-specific type of accreditation, except for selected fields such as MBA studies. The significance of the obligatory state accreditation (at a basic level) was so high that the need for voluntary accreditation (at a more advanced level) – from the University Accreditation Commission (UKA), that is, from academic peers – has gradually decreased.

Summary

The reform tackled one of the most disturbing aspects of the rapid expansion of Polish higher education in the 1990s: the low quality of its study programmes, especially, though not exclusively, in the private sector. The experience gained in introducing voluntary accreditation was used to introduce a national obligatory accreditation system. While prior to the reform the Ministry (or its consultative bodies) was legally and technically unable to control teaching quality, after 2002 the reform provided it with instruments to curb at least the worst cases of low quality, which were a concern in the 1990s, especially in the then emerging private sector. The establishment of the PKA changed the academic landscape; its accreditation activity led to the closing of low-quality study programmes and institutions—partly by anticipation: some institutions preferred not even to submit to accreditation and stopped operations voluntarily. As a consequence, the contraction of the private sector has outpaced the general contraction of the higher education system due to the demographic decline in Poland.

However, over the years the real impact of the PKA was eventually smaller than expected because of its inability to keep up to speed in the control of quality in the face of the ever growing number of study programmes in both sectors. In addition, the PKA's assessment procedures, which like all accreditation processes in Europe are mainly based on self-evaluation reports and (short) site visits, may fail to detect all cases of low-quality provision, since higher education institutions may hire professional report-writers to present themselves in a most favourable light.

Introducing obligatory state-led accreditation was among the least controversial parts of a long-debated higher education reform. Introducing this part without

waiting for the rest of the debate proved to be feasible and effective. The effects of such carefully designed smaller scale structural reforms can be equally far-reaching – and more politically and academically acceptable. The involvement of the major academic representative bodies in the early stages of the policy design, building on their experiences with voluntary academically-led accreditation, was crucial to achieving wide acceptance of the PKA. The rest of the comprehensive reform was introduced partly after 4 years (2005) and finally, as a full package, almost a decade later (2009-2012). The full package did not change the role of the PKA.

The reform did not target something other than it proclaimed: it focused on the quality of higher education offered in both sectors, even though indirectly it touched the core of higher education governance. There were no hidden agendas, which are usually easy to recognise and which would have diminished the legitimacy of the reform.

Interviewees

Dr Tomasz Jędrzejewski, Legal Expert of the Rectors' Conference (KRASP) involved in legislative work since 2005

Dr Andrzej Kurkiewicz, Deputy Head of Department of Innovation and Development, at the Ministry of Science and Higher Education

Dr hab. Krzysztof Leja, Expert of the Rectors' Conference (KRASP), expert in university governance and management

Bartłomiej Banaszak, Former president of Student's Parliament and at present chief expert on alumni transfer to the labour market

Dr Andrzej Rozmus, Expert on private sector of higher education and vice-rector of a private HEI in Rzeszów

Prof. dr. hab. Tadeusz Kufel, Member of the PKA in the field of economics and management

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