

# Ten years of accreditation in Poland

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## Abstract

Since 1994 Poland is trying to develop a system of higher education and system of quality assurance including an accreditation. 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. The accreditation specified by the regulations of the state law had its beginnings in 1998 when The Accreditation Commission of Higher Vocational Education came into being. Next, in 2001 the independent body the State Accreditation Committee was created. In the paper we present the quality evaluation procedures, site visit description, statistics of Committee achievements but also our private reflection on the experience we gathered during our work for the Accreditation Committee 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

New Higher Education Act in 1990 followed important political changes in Poland. Universities obtained, or actually regained, wide autonomy. 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. The rapid character of changes suppressed and put away thinking over details and consequences of the new situation.

All these factors resulted in the increase of the number of students from 400 thousand in 1989 to more than 1.8 million in 2004, including 600 thousand students of non-state high schools. At the same time the number of higher education institutions increased from 100 to almost 400, including over 260 non-state institutions.

The necessity of improving the educational systems is obvious. We are faced with an urgent need for improvement, for modernization and internationalization of higher education. Educational institutions increasingly have to show that they use procedures to assure and improve the quality of provision.

## 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.
2. The rapid growth of the student number with almost unchanged number of the academic staff resulted in significant increase of the teaching load. 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 programs). 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. The problem of accreditation and the quality of education appeared with a greater strength in the minds of the academic society.

### 4 The Accreditation Bodies

Evaluating quality in higher education started with the growing demand for "quality of education", or one ensuring the required standards and guaranteeing excellence. Discussion in the academic society led to establishing and launching the social accreditation activities. After a few years of discussions, numerous international contacts, the sector accreditation commissions was created. In the years 1994 – 2001 one by one accreditation commissions of various types of higher education were established under the patronage of the rectors conferences of different types of high schools organized in the Rectors Conference (KRASP). In 2002 the KRASP Accreditation Commission was established with the aim to create a common ground for cooperation and representation of sector commissions.

In parallel, in 1998 under the act of parliament the Accreditation Commission of Higher Vocational Education was established – the first state commission. As the works on a new academic law on higher education were getting prolonged, it seemed necessary for the government to prevent unfavorable phenomena accompanying the rapid grow of the educational sector, and thus (for the time being) the Act of 20<sup>th</sup> July 2001 amending the existing Higher Education Act, Vocational Schools of Higher Education Act, as well as some other Acts, that established the State Accreditation Committee as the legal body working for the quality of education (PKA).

It can be clearly seen that the process of accreditation realized 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 270 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 13 faculties of medicine in Poland.
- **The Accreditation Commission of the Technical Universities** granted accreditation 50 times to 12 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.

## 5 The State Accreditation Committee

The State Accreditation Committee is the only statutory institution covering the whole of higher education that works towards the evaluation of quality of education and whose evaluations and resolutions are legally binding.

In accordance with the Act the Committee should consist of 50 to 70 members. For the first three years term (2002-2004) 67 are appointed out of 599 candidates proposed by the academic society. The members of the Committee work in 10 following sections (taking into consideration the number of study areas, universities, etc.): Humanities, Natural Sciences, Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry, Agriculture, Forestry and Veterinary Sciences, Medical Sciences, Physical Education, Technical Sciences, Economics, Social Studies and Law, Fine Arts.

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

### 5.1 The basic statutory tasks of the State Accreditation Committee:

Under article 38.2 of the Higher Education Act, the tasks of the Committee are the following;

- 1) Preparing evaluations of all applications to:
  - a) establish an institution of higher education
  - b) establish a basic or external unit of an institution,
  - c) establish new degree programs in existing institution
  - d) assign specializations in higher vocational schools to areas of study in universities and other state non-vocational schools
- 2) Evaluating the quality of education as well as carrying out control of compliance with the requirements for offering degree programs in all Polish institutions of higher education – state and non-state, academic and vocational, supervised both by the Minister of National Education and Sports as well as the Minister of Health, Minister of Culture and National Heritage and the Minister of Infrastructure.
- 3) Granting the right to establish and offer study programs different from those specified in the regulation of Minister of National Education and Sports of 28<sup>th</sup> March 2002 on the requirements that an institution of higher education should meet to establish and run a study program.

The Committee began its activity on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2002. The first year of its activity was devoted to the creation of a higher education quality evaluation system. The quality evaluation procedure started in the second half of 2002. Below one can find the overview of the progress in the evaluation of Poland's national education made by the State Accreditation Committee and of its activities in the years 2002-2004.

### 5.2 Education Quality Evaluation Procedures

The most important statutory task of the Committee is the evaluation of education quality. The Presidium of the Committee selects the study programs and institutions of higher education to be evaluated in the given calendar year. The evaluation of quality of education is performed by evaluation panels composed of the members of sections and external experts. The evaluation procedure consists of a number of stages (Fig.1)

The first important stage of the evaluation procedure is preparation of the self-evaluation report by a school which will be evaluated. On the base of a template sent by a Section the institution is answering for the list of questions, gives the description of didactic process, describe the teaching facilities, the competence of academic staff etc. During the inspection the information from the report are compared with the actual state of affairs. The evaluation panel members meet the school authorities, as well as lecturers and students and audit some classes. During the panel's inspection the following issues are investigated:

- the academic staff, including both the basic staff being the precondition for the existence of a given school or a program, as well as extra staff;
- academic achievements of the staff;
- competence of the staff to teach given courses,
- curricula and study programs;
- quality of theses (including both those at the lycenciate as well as master' s level);
- the scholarly activity of the inspected organizational unit;
- cooperation between schools at the national and international level;
- students' affairs;
- teaching facilities, student' s living conditions and recreation facilities,
- legal aspects of education in the inspected area of studies.

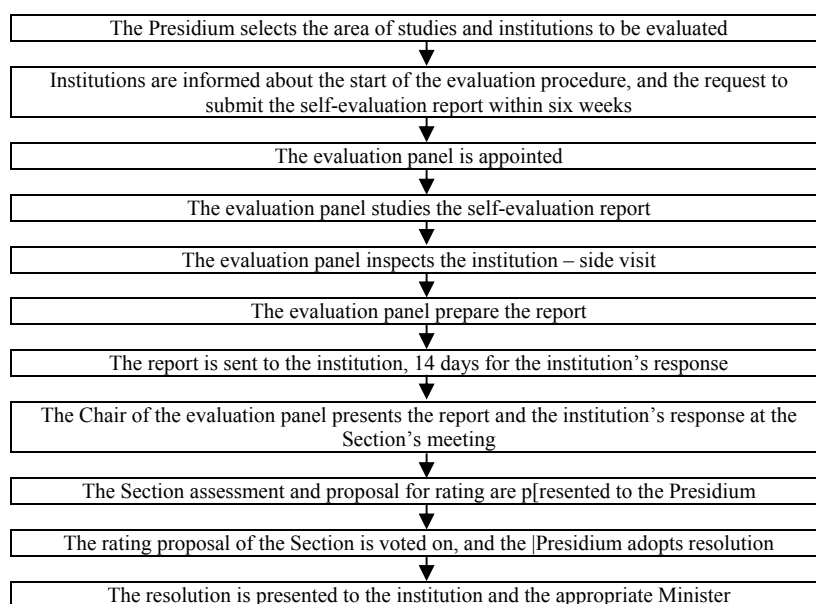


Fig.1 Stages of the education quality evaluation procedure

Detailed reports prepared by evaluation panels are a valuable source of information for the evaluated institutions. After the inspected schools get acquainted with these reports, they express their own opinions, and present their stance. Subsequently the report of the evaluation panel and the institution's response are analyzed by the appropriate Section of the Committee. This comprehensive procedure enables the Section to gain insights into all conditions influencing the quality of education provided in the inspected institution and thus to propose an objective rating, which ends the evaluation procedure. The section chairperson presents the rating proposal of the Section, along with the justification, to the Committee's Presidium, which confirms the awarded rating by voting and adopts a resolution on awarding the rating to the inspected unit. The resolution is presented to the inspected unit and to the minister of higher education who, should the rating be negative, issues his or her decision on the further course of action. If the rating awarded by the Committee applies to an institution supervised by another minister, the resolution is also presented to the minister in charge of the institution.

If the evaluated organizational unit does not agree with the education quality rating awarded, it can file an application for a review of its case within 14 days of receiving the Presidium's rating decision. The application will be examined during a joint meeting of the Section and the Presidium. The application for a review is presented during the meeting by the President of the Committee or by its other member appointed by him or her. The rating agreed on during the review session is final, and it should be awarded within no longer than 60 days of the submission of the review application.

The State Accreditation Committee has adopted the four-degree scale of ratings: outstanding, positive, conditional and negative. In case of outstanding and positive rating the next evaluation is performed after 5 years. The conditional rating automatically means a “warning”, as well as some time for improving the situation and solve the problems – employing new staff, changing of study programs etc. For the institution with negative rating the minister of higher education is required to take necessary steps, such as the suspension of recruitment or revoking the right to run the program in the evaluated unit.

### 5.3 Education Quality Evaluation Process in the years 2002-2004

During the years 2002-2004 the Committee selected 59 areas of study (in 35 the evaluation process was completed), and 867 institutions of higher education there were undergo evaluation. In 2002 it was 189 units (usually faculties), 317 units in 2003 and 361 units in 2004. Among the units selected for evaluation there were 105 state and 132 non-state schools. In 2002-2004 the Committee awarded 744 positive ratings, 178 conditional ratings (89 were later replaced by the positive ratings after the second evaluation), and 38 negative ratings, amounting to 78 %, 18 % and 4 % of the total. At the end of 2004 in the areas of study, where the evaluation procedure was completed, 20 positive ratings (2%) were replaced by the outstanding ones.

## 5.4 Other Committee Activities

As it was mentioned before the evaluation of quality of education is not the only area of the activity. The other work was devoted to the examination of applications filed by either institutions of higher education or prospective founders of such institutions. Of the 2078 applications filed in 2002-2004, 2049 were examined, including:

- 429 applications to establish new areas of study in newly established institutions of higher education;
- 451 applications to establish new areas of study at institutions of higher education founded on the basis of Higher Education Act of 1990,
- 483 applications to establish new areas of study at existing higher vocational institutions of education,
- 154 applications to establish master's degree programs;
- 137 applications to establish branches or external departments;
- 367 applications to assign a vocational course (specialization) to a given area of studies.

1032 application got positive recommendations and 1017 applications were turned down.

## 6.2 What were the applications to the Committee 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 Committee also considered 58 applications for establishing new master studies. Some cases referred to assigning a specialization 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:

- social studies and law – 567	- economics – 505
- technical studies – 317	- physical education - 172
- humanities – 158	- medical sciences - 125
- agricultural, forestry and veterinary sciences - 110	- mathematics, physics and chemistry – 55
- fine arts – 43	- natural sciences - 26

## 8 The Summary

The Accreditation Committees 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 Committees 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 Committee 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 Committee. Applications for establishing new schools are still pouring in. During the coming several months the study programs 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 Committee 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 Committee 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 Committee'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 Committee, 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 analyzed, and continuous quality assurance activities have to be taken in order to fulfill 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 Polish State Accreditation Committee.

