

Introduction

From Nursery School to the Professional Activity

Civilisation is a race between education and catastrophe
H.G. Wells

The recent twenty years have been a period of significant changes in higher education all over the world. These were bound, first of all, with political and technological transformations, including the technological revolution.

Scientific research has left university walls and institute rooms on a scale unknown before, and has become concentrated in the enterprise sector. The leading role of universities as the force of civilisation progress and innovation is now questionable, although, on the other hand, one can observe a significant increase in the demand for their most important product: highly qualified workforce.¹

The basic aims of higher education: conducting research, creating knowledge and passing it on to students and environment, developing skills, and shaping civil attitudes – have remained unchanged for centuries. However, the changing the environment, social, economic and technological conditions cause the necessity of constant modifications in the ways of universities functioning. The solutions appropriate in previous years do not always allow to face new challenges. Higher education has contributed considerably to the socioeconomic changes that have taken place in Poland since 1989. A huge achievement of the university environments has been popularising higher education in Poland.² Today, the level

¹ *Strategy for Higher Education Development in Poland until 2020*, Partial report prepared by a consortium of Ernest & Young Business Advisory and The Gdańsk Institute for Market Economics, February 2010.

² Data on first-year study enrolment: 591 096 people in the academic year 2008–2009 – *INFORMATION on study enrolment results in the academic year 2008–2009 in university schools supervised by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education and in non-public university schools*, Ministry of Science and Higher Education, Department of Higher Education Supervision and Organisation, Warszawa, March 10, 2009; 575 363 people in the academic year 2009–2010 – *INFORMATION on Study Enrolment Results in the Academic year 2009–2010 in University Schools Supervised by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education and in Non-public University Schools*, Ministry of Science and Higher Education, Department of Higher Education Supervision and Organisation, Warszawa, January 6, 2010; 593 859 people in the academic year 2010–2011 – *INFORMATION on Study Enrolment Results in the Academic Year 2010–2011 in University Schools Supervised by the*

of higher education prevalence belongs to the highest in Europe; there are now 467 universities in Poland.³

The process of popularisation took place spontaneously to a high degree, through founding new non-public universities and a dynamic development of paid studies in public universities in a narrow range of specialisations. Mass, inexpensive studies have dominated the activity of many universities, unfavourably influencing their other important tasks, especially conducting research. Moreover, the university management system (mainly the procedures of quality assurance) has turned out unprepared for such a significant increase in the number of students (today, there are 1.9 million of students in Poland, which constitutes 40% of the age group of 19–24 years).⁴

Constant education is one of the factors determining the development of the European educating society, which is coming into being. “Strategy for constant education development until 2010” is a document accepted by the Council of Ministers on July 8, 2003. A year ago, its assumptions were successfully implemented in the Polish system of national education. The strategy was to influence the development of adult education, and to make the Polish solutions closer to the European Union standards. A condition of realising the idea of building the knowledge-based society in Poland was – and still is – assuming the importance of the life-long education concept, commonly recommended in the previous years.

Education is a process leading to a relatively permanent change in one’s behaviour or possibility of behaviour, based on experience. Individual experience therefore constitutes a source of human behaviour modifications in the process of education. The richer the experience, the wider the range and quality of change.

The idea of life-long education (OECD, Paris 1996) comprises individual development as well as the development of social features in all forms and all contexts – in a formal and informal system, i.e. in schools, vocational education centres, universities and adult education centres, and also within the frameworks of incidental education, i.e. at home, at work, or in the community. In the idea of life-long education, the need to prepare and encourage all children to learn during their whole lives, starting in the early years, is emphasised. The concept directs the activities in a way appropriate to ensure suitable possibilities to everybody: to adult, working, and unemployed people who need retraining or increasing qualifications.⁵

The Education System Act⁶ defines constant education as education in schools for adults, as well as obtaining and supplementing general knowledge, skills and voca-

Ministry of Science and Higher Education and in Non-public University Schools, Ministry of Science and Higher Education, Department of Higher Education Supervision and Organisation, Warszawa, December 22, 2010.

³ Data from the Ministry of Science and Higher Education on the register of public and non-public university schools in Poland, including: public academic universities (59), public higher vocational schools (36), and non-public university schools (372 listed in the register of non-public university schools and non-public university school unions, kept by the Minister of Science and Higher Education, latest update on July 29, 2010).

⁴ *Diagnosis of Higher Education State in Poland*, Partial report prepared by a consortium of Ernest & Young Business Advisory and The Gdańsk Institute for Market Economics. November 2009.

⁵ *Strategy for Constant Education Development until 2010*, Document accepted by the Council of Ministers on July 8, 2003.

⁶ *Education System Act* from September 7, 1991. “Journal of Laws” 1991, No. 95, pos. 425.

tional qualifications in extramural forms by people who have already fulfilled their school duty. So far, the dominant form of education in the educational practice is formal education, i.e. educational system starting from kindergarten and reaching to university. The changing labour market, new technologies, new jobs and specialisations lead to a gradual increase of informal education significance. The least importance is still ascribed to incidental education, being a result of everyday human activity, as well as of the influence of the environment and omnipresent media.

Putting emphasis on integrating the forms of education pointed out makes the constant education process gain a new, holistic character. Treating formal, informal, and incidental education as complementary elements – with the consideration of vocational qualification standards – enables the organisational structures of the educational system to coexist, as well as makes it easier to obtain and recognise vocational qualifications. This is also a ground for wide exchange of professional, methodological and organisational experience, as well as a step towards building an open and flexible system of education, truly supporting cognitive activities and economic initiative – leading to an increase of employment opportunities in the contemporary labour market.⁷

Facing the dynamics of the processes taking place in the contemporary world, constant education is becoming a significant factor of development. It is a demand of civilisation and a huge challenge, at the same time. For an individual, constant education means a chance to appropriately function in the contemporary world and to create the course of one's own life, and a chance for an active citizenship (in the European dimension). It is also a factor allowing to maintain one's position in the more and more demanding labour market.

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⁷ *Strategy for constant education...*, op. cit.