EDUCATION AND PRACTICE

PROVIDING DEGREE PROGRAMMES OF A PRACTICAL PROFILE IN POLAND. LEGAL, ORGANIZATIONAL AND FINANCIAL ASPECTS

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ABSTRACT: The reflections on the topic of this article have been divided into three parts concerning three aspects of providing degree programmes of a practical profile by higher vocational education schools in Poland. The first part has been devoted to discussing legal issues and analyzing provisions of Polish Law on Higher Education. The second part of this elaboration concerns organizational matters connected with providing degree programmes of a practical profile. In the last part of this article financial opportunities and threats connected with providing such programmes have been signaled, but also some solutions suggested, i.e. the model of the minimum staffing requirement for the first-cycle degree programmes of a practical profile.

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Introduction

The concept of quality assurance started in the manufacturing sector (OED, 2006), where principles like Total Quality Management (TQM), 5S of Good Housekeeping, and Poka-Yoke for mistake-proofing were applied to achieve conformance of products or services to set specifications in order to guarantee customer satisfaction.

In higher education institutions (HEIs) quality assurance is applied in order to achieve “quality education”. The concept of quality in HEIs, however, varies depending on whose opinion is in perspective. Students may define quality in terms of their classroom experience - the facilities and the faculty; for parents it may mean the employability of their children upon completion of their degrees; for the faculty it may mean the staff development programs provided by the HEIs; for the employers - the competence of the graduates joining the workforce; and for the institutions it may mean the quality and quantity of research outputs. Quality assurance in HEIs, therefore, must be able to manage experiences of all the stakeholders - students, faculty and staff, community and industry, and the institution itself.

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The European Union Member States are given a free hand in shaping their educational systems, which causes that the structures of them differ to a smaller or larger extent in particular countries (Eurydice, 2013). As far as the higher education is concerned in some states there is a clear distinction at the institutional level between different types of higher education, namely two types of schools are recognized: professional higher education and academic higher education ones. Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, the Netherlands, Ireland, Germany, Portugal, Switzerland, Sweden1 are the countries which use such a distinction and in other states the division is not that clear. Not a long time ago Poland belonged to the latter group, but the latest policy of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education has been aimed at distinguishing clearly academic institutions from non-academic ones such as higher vocational education schools. As a result (in the light of the latest changes of legal regulations), in the future a Polish higher education system will consist of two types of institutions: institutions that will provide degree programmes of a practical profile preparing students to meet labour market needs and institutions that will provide degree programmes of an academic profile preparing students to participate in and conduct scientific research2. Taking into consideration the current situation in the Polish higher education system and demographic processes this policy seems to be rightful, reasonable and justified (Zimny and Jasiński, 2013). However, the implementation of this policy means the necessity of introducing many changes within the educational process at these higher education institutions that will provide degree programmes of a practical profile, but also it will affect financial issues connected with the educational process.

The aim of this article is to present and analyze three aspects of providing degree programmes of a practical profile by higher vocational education schools, i.e. legal, organizational and financial aspects. Making clear division between the mentioned above aspects resulted into dividing the article into three parts. In the first part legal issues and provisions of Polish Law on Higher Education have been discussed and analyzed3. The second part has been devoted to organizational matters connected with providing degree programmes of a practical profile. In this part the authors’ experiences with regard to this area have been presented. In the last part of this article financial opportunities and threats connected with providing such programmes have been signaled, but also some solutions suggested, i.e. the model of the minimum staffing requirement for the first-cycle degree programmes of a practical profile.

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1 In the category of profession-oriented Higher Education Institutions (thus offering curricula oriented towards the development of professional skills) we can find among others: Instituts Universitaires de Technologie in France, Hautes Ecoles in Belgium, Hogescholen in Belgium and the Netherlands, Fachhochschulen in Austria, Belgium, Germany and Switzerland, Professionshøjskolen in Denmark, Ammattikorkeakoulu in Finland, Yrkeshögskola in Sweden, Politécnicos in Portugal and Institutes of Technology in Ireland (EURASHE, 2014).


Degree programmes of a practical profile in the light of legal regulations

Degree programmes of a practical profile is a term which in Polish higher education appeared officially when the Act of 18 March 2011 - Amending the Law on Higher Education, the Act on Academic Degrees and Academic Title and Academic Degrees in Art and Academic Title in Art and Certain Other Acts came into force. In the second article, section one, subsection 18e it is said that “practical profile comprises educational components which serve to equip students with practical skills”. This definition was specified in subsection 18ea pursuant to which ’practical profile comprises components which serve to equip students with practical skills and social competencies’ and is realized on the assumption that ‘over half of a degree programme expressed in ECTS credits consists of practical courses, which shape these skills and competencies including competencies obtained during workshops conducted by people with professional experience gained in an appropriate field outside academia’.

A lot of attention in the provisions of the Act of 27 July 2005 - Law on Higher Education was devoted to the issue of so called the minimum staffing requirement thus the academic staff members who must be employed if the HEIs (higher education institutions) would like to provide degree programmes. As far as degree programmes of an academic profile are concerned the academic staff must be full-time employees, but in the case of degree programmes of a practical profile it is possible to employ people on a part-time basis, on condition they have professional experience gained in an appropriate field outside academia (art. 9a, section 1). Moreover, a higher education institution providing programmes of a practical profile may substitute in their minimum staffing requirement one holder of an academic title of professor or the degree of habilitated doctor by two holders of the degree of doctor with considerable professional experience gained in an appropriate area (connected with a field of studies) outside academia (art. 9a section 2) or one holder of the academic degree of doctor by two holders of the degree of magister provided they demonstrate considerable professional experience gained in an appropriate field outside academia (art. 9a section 3).

A crucial issue which must be taken into consideration with regard to degree programmes of a practical profile and which was covered in the mentioned Act is the obligation to include at least three-month vocational training in the programme of study (art. 11 section 9). A certain possibility was signaled that education may be organized alternately - in a form of courses provided by a higher education institution and a practical placement at employer’s, taking into consideration achieving all the learning outcomes comprised in the programme of study for this field, level and profile of study. Moreover, legal provisions allow the possibility of providing degree programmes of a practical profile with the involvement of commercial enterprises (art. 168a section 1).

Some legal issues concerning degree programmes of a practical profile were elaborated and clarified in the Regulation of 3 October 2014 by the Minister of

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3 In a case of the first-cycle programmes the minimum staffing requirement consists of at least three holders of an academic title of professor or habilitated doctor and at least six holders of an academic title of doctor.
Science and Higher Education (MSHE) on the conditions of providing degree programmes in a given field and a given level of study\(^1\). In § 4 section 4 of this regulation is said that practical courses should equip students with practical skills and social competencies. Moreover, they ought to be conducted under conditions appropriate for the scope of work, in such a way that enables students to complete specified practical activities themselves, and by people, the majority of who, have professional experience gained in an appropriate field outside academia corresponding to the range of classes (§ 5 section 1).

In the authors’ opinion the legal solutions binding in Poland with regard to degree programmes of a practical profile should be assessed positively. Nevertheless, the implementation of some of them, e.g. a three-month vocational training (practical placement) is undoubtedly very difficult from the organizational point of view (provided HEIs do not want to prolong the duration of the first-cycle programmes which lasts 6 semesters) although is really justified. Moreover, other solutions e.g. the possibility of employing people with professional experience gained in an appropriate field outside academia on a part-time basis and including them in the minimum staffing requirement can definitely facilitate the functioning of HEIs providing degree programmes of a practical profile, and above all can contribute to staff costs reduction. One thing of crucial importance is the fact that current binding laws concerning higher education in Poland made many issues specific and the matters, so far vague, were cleared up. The authors express the opinion that it is better to have laws which are difficult to meet, but clear and transparent than too liberal and permissive provisions, which cause unnecessary doubts and lead to malpractice - both by HEIs and supervision authorities. In a democratic state the statutory law should be a basis for assessment of institutions functioning and not internal regulations of supervision authorities, which not infrequently go much too far. The same law should guard duties, but also rights of particular authorities, including these ones operating in a sphere of higher education.

**Organization of degree programmes of a practical profile**

Providing degree programmes of a practical profile means a necessity to introduce many changes in the educational process - both with regard to intended learning outcomes, programme of study and the educational process itself. In this part of the elaboration the authors presented the solutions which were implemented during last two years at the State University of Applied Sciences in Konin while creating new fields of study for the first-cycle programmes of a practical profile and applying for an authorization of the Minister of Science and Higher Education for the provision of degree programmes in given fields and introduced as regards fields of study already realized at University, for whom it was necessary to determine a profile. In order to present the solutions in a clear and transparent way, the list of actions undertaken (with a short comment) was presented below.

1. Consulting with stakeholders the programmes of study including learning outcomes and curricula of study. Programmes of study of newly created fields of study are discussed during meetings with representatives of commercial enterprises from socio-economic environment which run their businesses in the area connected with new fields of study. Such meeting are organized before applying for an authorization of the Minister of Science and Higher Education for the provision of degree programme in a new field of study. Furthermore, study programmes of the fields of study already provided are discussed during regular

\(^1\) Official Journal of Laws of 2014, item 1370 (Dz.U. z 2014 r. poz. 1370).
meetings of programme boards for a given field of study, which consist of academic teachers, students, graduates and representatives of stakeholders. Such sessions are held at least twice an academic year - usually in November and May. Remarks and opinions expressed by stakeholders are taken into consideration at the stage of study programmes improvement in order to connect the educational process with development needs of Konin region, particularly with labour market needs.

2. Formalizing cooperation with commercial enterprises from socio-economic environment of the HEI by signing appropriate agreements. On the basis of art. 168a of the Act - Law on Higher Education the agreements were signed with enterprises and institutions, which had already cooperated with the University and helped to realize the educational process in the particular fields of study. In line with the content of the agreements the cooperation was to concern the following undertakings: study programmes improvement by taking into account the stakeholders’ points of view, conducting some courses/classes by representatives of stakeholders with appropriate professional experience gained outside academia, realizing practical placements at stakeholders’ institutions and enterprises, organizing joint academic undertakings, in particular lectures, seminars, conferences, but also non-degree postgraduate programmes, courses, trainings and conducting mutual academic projects including those co-financed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education and the European Union, elaborating materials for academic publications. Taking into consideration the fact that the agreements were signed with the institutions which had already cooperated with the University on a regular basis, it can be expected that provisions stated in them do not remain moribund. Signing the agreements was the way to legitimize the actual state.

3. Increasing the number of academic staff members with professional experience gained outside academia involved in the teaching process. A certain part of practical classes (different for particular fields of study) is conducted by people with broad work experience who are currently employed in institutions and enterprises running businesses and functioning in areas corresponding to the particular fields of study. These people usually cooperate with the University and are employed on the basis of civil law contracts. There are still among them people who are employed on a part-time basis at the State University of Applied Sciences in Konin.

4. Increasing the number of hours of professional training (practical placement) in the curricula of study. In the programmes of study of particular fields of study a 3-month practical placement has been provided which accounts for 450 taught hours. This professional training is going to be realized during holidays and in a case of certain fields of study during the 5th and 6th semesters.

5. Increasing the share of practical courses in the curricula of study. About 65-70% of courses are provided in the form of practical courses: workshops, laboratories, projects and field work. It should be emphasized here that increasing the number of practical classes, therefore changing and reversing the “hour relation” between lectures and practical classes, was accompanied by limiting for full-time students in a 6-semester curricula of study the number of so called contact didactic hours to the level of 1800-2000 hours and introducing tutorials and e-learning.

6. Lowering the number of students while providing practical classes. The number of students in a tutorial group was determined at a minimum level which is 25 people, however at the stage of forming a group, such a group cannot be less numerous than 20 students. Therefore, if the number of students was 65 at a particular year of study it would be possible to create three tutorial groups. With regard to other practical classes the number of students are at the similar level - a
laboratory/project group - up to 20 students, a language group - up to 25 students, but more than 20, a seminar group - between 12 and 15 students.

7. Increasing the role of project methods while conducting practical classes. A significant number of practical classes in particular fields of study are provided with the use of project methods and moreover, are finalized with the preparation of appropriate projects by students and these projects are supposed to concern the subject studied and should be specific for a conducted course.

8. Providing students with courses in foreign languages, courses in the form of computer laboratories, courses taught during a multi-day training and the subject 'entrepreneurship'. The curricula of study for particular fields of study include at least two courses in the English language, i.e. one field-specific course and one corresponding to a specialty; at least one course in the form of computer laboratory except for a subject Information Technologies; at least one course in the form of multi-day training carried out by representatives of appropriate enterprises and institutions - after completing the course students will obtain a certificate; and the course called 'entrepreneurship' provided by Konin Chamber of Commerce - the largest organization bringing together entrepreneurs from Konin region. All of the aforementioned subjects will be conducted during semesters V or VI in the form of workshops or laboratories, thus the groups with a dozen or so students.

9. Realizing courses under conditions appropriate for the scope of work. In programmes of study of several fields of study some courses will be explicitly provided in the form of workshops and field work by representatives of appropriate enterprises and institutions and at the same time at the headquarters of these entities.

10. Making compulsory to prepare empirical theses. Students and (thesis supervisors) were obliged to prepare diploma dissertations based on appropriate quantitative or qualitative research and are supposed to be in the form of projects, case studies etc.

11. Organizing free of charge and paid courses and training courses for students. Students are given an opportunity to participate in a range of free of charge training courses within a project called “Young Entrepreneurship Academy”, which is conducted by the State University of Applied Sciences in Konin and Konin Chamber of Commerce in cooperation with local enterprises and institutions. The aim of these trainings is to acquire by students practical skills in the field of setting up and running a business. Moreover, students have a possibility to participate in additional courses and trainings (not covered in the programme of study), which they have to pay for a little fee, among others: a camp counselor course, a self-defense course, a first-aid course, a sign language training, etc.

12. Organizing meetings for students with representatives of enterprises and institutions on a regular basis. Students are provided with an opportunity to take part in meetings with representatives of enterprises and institutions whose aim is to present employment possibilities in particular branches corresponding to study programmes of certain fields of study. Moreover, students have a possibility to participate in meetings with people having a very broad experience in running a business and managing companies or institutions. Such meetings are organized within a project called “Business Professionals Academy”, which is conducted by the State University of Applied Sciences in Konin and Konin Chamber of Commerce. The project is also aimed at making its participants familiar with professional and practical views on entrepreneurship and human resources management.
It should be emphasized here that the different solutions presented above, are by no means exhaustive, and are only examples of measures taken to make degree programmes provided by the State University of Applied Sciences in Konin more practical. Moreover, it should be also stated here that there is no guarantee that these implemented solutions are absolutely and completely appropriate, accurate and relevant. Nevertheless, a lot of factors indicate that their implementations was justified and above all it shows the continuous effort put into improving quality of education.

Financial aspects of providing degree programmes of a practical profile

The changes within the organization of education aiming at making degree programmes practical undoubtedly contribute to higher costs of didactic process realization. One of the reasons of this growth results from increasing the share of practical courses in the curricula of study, which are conducted in groups with a lower number of students. In this part of the elaboration financial threats and opportunities associated with providing degree programmes of a practical profile have been signaled. Some solutions have been suggested, i.e. the procedure of constructing the minimum staffing requirement for newly launched first-cycle degree programmes of a practical profile, which in the authors’ opinion seem to be rational and reasonable.

The specific activities conducted by HEIs, in this respect providing educational services causes that the primary factor of production, in microeconomic sense, is labour or putting it another way, human capital (human resources). Therefore, it should not be surprising the highest costs incurred constitute staff costs (not infrequently they account for more than 80% of all costs). Providing degree programmes of a practical profile is certainly significant for the level of costs. Except for, mentioned before, increasing the number of practical classes conducted in smaller groups, which generate personnel costs, a range of additional factors can potentially contribute to cost growth. Among the most crucial ones are: engaging people with broad experience gained outside academia and providing some courses under conditions appropriate for the scope of work. Both situations mean the necessity to bear relevant and substantial costs - paying a group of "practicians" whose expectations with regard to salary are much higher than the academic staff and organizing workshops and field work conducted in small groups under a supervision of an experienced employee from an appropriate institution or company who is a kind of mentor for students.

Providing degree programmes of a practical profile do not only mean threats resulting from increasing costs of education including staff costs, but also some facilitations and opportunities for HEIs providing such programmes whose sources can be traced to legal binding provisions. First of all, in the light of the Regulation of 20 February 2013 by the Minister of Science and Higher Education (MSHE) amending and changing the regulation on granting and distribution of the state budget subsidies for public and non-public HEIs\(^1\) - while computing so called student-doctoral student subsidy index for HEIs it was established that for students at public higher vocational education schools of a practical profile it would account for 1.2 (for the rest of students the subsidy predictor or so called conversion rate is 1.0). Secondly, pursuant to the provision of the Act - Law on Higher Education, frankly speaking, in the minimum staffing requirement it is possible to replace one holder of an academic title of professor or the degree of habilitated doctor by two holders of the degree of

doctor, and the holder of the degree of doctor by two holders of the degree of magister. Such a solution can be profitable and beneficial on condition that these aforementioned people (i.e. ‘substitutes’) are employed part-time (at least 0.25 of full-time employment).

In the context of so far reflections a question arises how to construct a minimum staffing requirement at newly launched first-cycle degree programmes of a practical profile in order, on the one hand, to act in a rational way, both from a financial point of view and others (non-financial ones) and on the other hand, to establish ultimately the minimum core staff which will enable to provide degree programmes under conditions of uncertainty and high risk, even for a relatively low number of students. The amended Act - Law on Higher Education came into force and enabled to include in a minimum staffing requirement people employed part-time. Therefore, it seems rational and legally allowed to include in the minimum staff requirement two holders of an academic title of professor or habilitated doctor employed on a full-time basis, five holders of the degree of doctor (two of them with practical experience and employed half-time) and also six holders of the degree of magister who possess practical experience and are employed quarter-time (0.25 of full-time employment).

Taking into consideration the fact that in the case of providing new fields of study the requirements concerning the minimum staff resources should be fully met starting the second academic year of the first cycle of study it would be justified in the authors’ opinion to use the following order of employing people who eventually will form the minimum staffing requirement for a field of study for the first-cycle degree programme of a practical profile: during the first academic year - one holder of the degree of professor or habilitated doctor and two holders of the degree of doctor; during the second academic year - the others. The minimum staffing requirement could be presented as a mathematical equation:

\[
\text{MINSTAFFREQ} = 2\text{PROF or DRHAB.full-time} + 3\text{DR.full-time} + 2\text{DR(half-time)} + 6\text{MGR(0.25)}
\]

Including in the minimum staffing requirement the certain number of academic teachers on certain positions would mean the necessity to ensure probably not more than 2500 of didactic hours during an academic year (that depends on a teaching load which can be different at various HEIs) in order to provide academic teachers with a proper number of taught hours. That number could be slightly reduced by including a holder of the degree of doctor in another minimum staffing requirement of a similar field of study provided by the same HEI. In the light of binding law a holder of the degree of doctor can belong to the minimum staffing requirement on condition the academic teacher would conduct at least 60 hours of classes in a particular field of study. Taking into account the average number of contact hours in the 6-semester curricula of study for the first-cycle degree programmes it can be concluded that 2500 of didactic hours would be possible to realize even with a low number of students in one field of study - 40-50 students a year, thus 120-150 students in a full-cycle programme.

It should be stressed that the minimum staffing requirement model for the first-cycle degree programmes of a practical profile mentioned above is neither a perfect solution nor easy to implement. In fact, the educational process is determined by a range of factors that have a differentiated influence on the selection of the minimum staffing requirement. Nevertheless, this model is an attempt to present the optimal way to respond to demographic challenges and consequently, potential financial problems of higher education institutions can face while the number of students is decreasing.
Conclusion

The sector of higher education evolves towards more and more complex system of connections and behaviours of its participants, being simultaneously influenced by various conditions and factors on the micro scale (HEI and its resources, operational strategies), on the mezo scale (local and regional policies), on the macro scale (the State and its institutions) and on the international scale (European area of higher education and its institutions), (Pluta-Olearnik, 2009). It can be openly stated that we are currently witnessing something close to the revolution in higher education, which unfortunately is taking place in the environment of fierce competition of winning a client due to demographic decline (Instytut Sokratesa, 2011). It is highly possible that not the strongest and the biggest schools will survive the revolution, as it has happened for hundred years in many aspects of socio-economic life, but those which will be able to adapt to aforementioned changes taking place at the moment and will manage them skillfully (Jasiński, Zimny, 2012).

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