

## Higher Education Reform in Poland. An Example of Training for Candidates for the Teaching Profession

Danuta Konieczka-Śliwińska / e-mail: konsliw@amu.edu.pl  
Institute of History, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań

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*This article presents the main directions of reforms in the contemporary higher education system in Poland, focusing especially on the model of training for candidates for the teaching profession. The author highlights various changes in Polish universities, which were grounded on reflections on the constant development of didactics at the university level and on ways of understanding this, as well possible concepts of academic education. The paper discusses the most important stages in the implementation of the Bologna Process in Poland, with the resulting consequences for the higher education system. The last part of the article is devoted to a detailed presentation of the ongoing implementation of training standards for teachers, where the author draws critical attention to the increasing importance of psychological and pedagogical features.*

Key words: *didactics of higher education; higher education in Poland; teacher training; higher education reform*

Different changes in the contemporary world (political, social, cultural etc.) determine new challenges for the educational system. The society of information and knowledge, which is forming under the influence of the development of information and communication technologies, requires modern forms of education, methods of interactive work and new evaluation tools. In this process of necessary change, universities in Poland are also involved. They are adapting the model of studies to the requirements of European integration, the labour market, and social expectations. Therefore, we undertake the task of rebuilding the entire system of student education, trying to combine tradition with modernity, and developing new educational solutions. In the academic environment, these changes are accompanied by an increased interest in the didactics of higher education, the task of which is to elaborate upon the effective ways of intensifying students' educational processes and advancing their effectiveness.

## Polish didactics in higher education

The didactics of higher education (also called the „pedagogy of higher education”, or less often “academic didactics”), is one of the domains of general didactics, or in a broader sense, one of the pedagogical disciplines<sup>1</sup>. Polish didactics in universities as well as in elementary schools or high schools has been differentiated in the education system by the criterion of organization. The object of its research, as Teresa Bauman wrote recently, are “[...] issues related to the functioning of academic education [...] and educational process in universities”<sup>2</sup>. In the early seventies, the Polish educator, Wincenty Okoń, defined this domain very significantly as “university didactics”, however, he treated it in relatively narrow terms as “teaching and learning in universities”<sup>3</sup>. It is worth noting that many authors use the term “didactics of higher education”, though they are referring to education at the university level without defining its notion<sup>4</sup>.

Interest in the didactics of higher education in Poland began to develop in the interwar period. Then, several works were published which were directly linked with reflections on the education of university students as well as scientific articles on this topic in the journal „Nauka Polska”<sup>5</sup>. In the second half of the XXth century, the educational problems of higher education were much more intensively explored,<sup>6</sup> which was manifested not only in studies conducted in various research centres (e.g. in Krakow, Warsaw, Katowice, or Poznań), but also in efforts to publish specialized scientific journals dealing with this issue. In the years 1968–1991 the quarterly “Dydaktyka Szkoły Wyższej” was published by the Intercollegiate Department of Higher Education Research, and then

1 Okoń, W. (1998). *Nowy słownik pedagogiczny*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademickie ŻAK, p. 79.

2 Bauman, T. (2003). *Dydaktyka szkoły wyższej*. In Pilch, T. (Ed.), *Encyklopedia Pedagogiczna XXI wieku*, Vol. 1. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademickie ŻAK, p. 807.

3 Okoń, W. (1971). *Elementy dydaktyki szkoły wyższej*. Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, p. 26.

4 See e.g.: Domagała-Kręcioch, A., Wyżga O. (2009) (Eds.), *Współczesne wyzwania dydaktyki szkoły wyższej*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Pedagogicznego; Schrade, U. (2010) (Ed.), *Dydaktyka szkoły wyższej*, Warszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza Politechniki Warszawskiej; Bereźnicki, F. (2009). *Zagadnienia dydaktyki szkoły wyższej*, Szczecin: „Pedagogium” Wydawnictwo OR TWP w Szczecinie.

5 More on this topic: Okoń, W. *Elementy...*, pp. 27–28; and Czerniewski, W. (1963) *Rozwój dydaktyki polskiej w latach 1918–1954*. Warszawa: Państwowe Zakłady Wydawnictw Szkolnych, pp. 104–105.

6 Okoń, W. *Nowy słownik*, p. 79; and Czerniewski, W. *Rozwój*, p. 154 and pp. 420–428.

by the Institute of Policy for Science and Higher Education. In the years 1953–1991, on behalf of the Ministry of Higher Education in cooperation with the Association of Polish Teachers, the monthly journal “*Życie Szkoły Wyższej*” was issued. Since 1991 the periodical “*Pedagogika Szkoły Wyższej*” has been issued at Szczecin University (currently it is available as a biannual online-journal)<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, the Faculty of Educational Studies at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań issues the periodical “*Neodidagmata*”, which has been present on the publishing market since 1970; although the journal was initially devoted mainly to teaching in colleges, today it has a much broader thematic scope<sup>8</sup>.

According to Teresa Bauman, we can understand the didactics of higher education in two different ways: in its broader meaning, it is understood as a reflection both on the conditions of the educational process carried out in universities and on the educational objectives at this level of teaching as well as on its tasks and its place in the whole educational system; whereas in its narrower meaning, the didactics of higher education is treated as a kind of „didactic instrument for academic teachers”<sup>9</sup>. The broader understanding of the didactics of higher education is closely linked with the acknowledged concept of studies where the methods of work with the student are the consequence of this concept. Thus, it primarily responds to the following question: who is served by the educational process at the university level and what lies at its root? To a lesser extent, it serves the normative feature which is critically focused on the effects of theoretical assumptions and practical solutions. It is rather an analysis of the process of studying and learning in universities and its general conditions and socio-cultural context than a reflection on the practical didactic competences of academic teachers and on the methods of work with students. Whereas in its narrower meaning, the didactics of higher education is focused not so much on objectives and conditions, but primarily on the question of how the learning process should be conducted in universities. Its main concerns are effective ways of transferring knowledge to students, of allowing them to acquire skills by themselves and improving the educational experience of academic teachers<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, we would call it a „methodology of higher education”, analogically to the used distinction in particular subjects or educational domains between didactics and methodology.

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<sup>7</sup> See: <http://psw.whus.pl> [access: 6. 11. 2015].

<sup>8</sup> See: <http://neodidagmata.amu.edu.pl> [access: 6. 11. 2015].

<sup>9</sup> Bauman, T. *Dydaktyka*, p. 807.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 807–808.

However, the very best seems to be a variant of the third approach to the didactics of higher education, which was not singled out by T. Bauman, but which combines the two aforementioned variants. It is difficult to imagine an effective methodological tool which were not based on multi-faceted scientific reflection, and, vice versa, there is no valuable theory which is detached from practical solutions. Thus, the modern didactics of higher education should not only undertake tasks related to the scientific basis of education at the academic level, but also their practical dimension and an evaluation of effectiveness in the teaching process carried out therein.

The issue of the didactics of higher education is also related to the question of understanding the objectives of education at the academic level. Herein, too, there are two opposing approaches. The first one, which we would define as the traditional approach, assumes that the essence of the educational process at this level does not differ significantly from lower levels of education, and considers this process as a transfer of core curriculum content related to a control of its assimilation by students. It attaches great importance to the knowledge which a student must learn and to the content which together is supposed to provide education but not a professional qualification. Here, the student appears as a reliant and uniform object of the didactic-educational measures of academic teachers. They are those who, within the faculty's scientific council, decide on the purposes of the learning process and the obligatory contents of the core curriculum. In this approach, the corresponding large number of class hours and direct contact with the teacher is very important. The student's subjectivity in the selection of subjects and the contents of education as well as the possibility of individual choices in shaping the student's own learning profile are limited to a minimum. An important features of this approach is also the predominance of lectures over other methods of activating students, authoritarian relationships between students and academic staff, prevalence of course lectures over monographic ones, with classes as merely a complement to the content of lectures<sup>11</sup>.

On the other hand, the opposing approach to higher education didactics, which we define as the modern one, treats the teaching process in universities as a way of creating conditions for independent studies, and which is primarily focused on the needs of students, their interests, abilities and self-realization. It assumes that the aim of study is

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<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, p. 808; and Schrader, U. *Dydaktyka szkoły wyższej*, In Schrader, U. *Dydaktyka*, p. 42.

not the acquisition of knowledge under the guidance of an academic teacher, but a spiritual exercise which is leading the student to the acquisition of a particular competence. The student is treated as an adult who is able to bear the consequences of his or her decisions. Thus, the academic teacher is primarily an adviser and a tutor who provides students with the opportunities for learning. Therefore, studies are treated as an independent process of acquiring knowledge and beliefs, for instance, in ways of investigating answers to questions which have been posed by the teacher or which have occurred in the course of the student's own afterthoughts. In this approach, more important is the form of classes rather than their content, as well as the student's activity and independence, a wide variety of learning paths, development of a critical attitude, and applying proper techniques to motivation<sup>12</sup>.

It is difficult to assess which one of those two models actually prevails in the modern didactics of higher education. It seems that Polish universities are definitely moving in the direction of education defined as a modern, which emphasises the self-reliance of students and tries to prepare them in the best way for the challenges of a changing world. However, the advocates of the traditional model criticise this approach which, according to them, could lead to a situation where graduate students from Polish universities will be superficial, ignorant and irresponsible.

### **The reform of higher education in Poland**

In 1999, Poland signed the Bologna Declaration which constituted the beginning of the long-term process of higher education reform in our country. Then, in order to align the higher education systems of European countries, it was decided to establish by 2010 a European Higher Education Area. In the Polish context this has been manifested, among other ways, in the recognition of comparable academic degrees and titles system (implementation of the Diploma Supplement), adoption of a higher education system based on three levels (bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees), application of the system of credit points (ECTS – European Credit Transfer System), development of mobility among students and academic teachers (the Lifelong Learning programs, Erasmus, bilateral international contracts, *etc.*), growth of the quality level of higher education (e.g. with the establishment of the Polish Accreditation Committee).

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<sup>12</sup> Bauman, T. *Dydaktyka szkoły*, pp. 808–809; Schrader, U. *Dydaktyka*, pp. 42–43.

The next stage of the implementation of the Bologna Process in the Polish higher education system was the establishment of the National Qualifications Framework. On the one hand, it allows for the development of various educational forms, programs and institutions, and on the other, it also makes possible a comparison of students' achievements and qualifications in different countries. According to the regulation of 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2011, the Minister of Science and Higher Education in Poland defined the National Qualifications Framework, pointing out the issue of description of learning outcomes for particular disciplines (humanities, social studies, physics, technical sciences, medicine, agriculture and arts)<sup>13</sup>. Besides the possibility of referring the level of skills acquired in the Polish education system to the level of qualifications in the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), as well as the continuity of education from the perspective of learning throughout life, this reform has also created a real chance for improvement of the quality of education at the university level as well as for changes in the current thinking about the didactics of higher education.

Further regulation of the law in Poland (i.e. amendment of the "Law on Higher Education" and related ministerial regulations) have increased the autonomy of the core curricula of universities, providing the freedom for their primary organizational units to create entirely new fields of studies that could be better adapted to labor market needs and the educational aspirations of today's youth<sup>14</sup>. In turn, the new courses of studies have necessitated definition, particularly in an education program consisting of two parts: description of the intended learning outcomes (at the level of knowledge, skills and so-called social competences) and description of the process of education, the aim of which is to achieve these effects. In addition, an obligation was introduced to account in the program for at least 30% of ECTS points to be obtained from elective courses, which should be chosen individually by the student. Thus, Polish universities were somehow forced not only to carefully rethink and describe the intended learning outcomes for particular studying programs, but also to create a suitable flexible learning program, which enables students to

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<sup>13</sup> See Rozporządzenie Ministra Nauki i Szkolnictwa Wyższego z dnia 2 listopada 2011 r. w sprawie Krajowych Ram Kwalifikacji dla Szkolnictwa Wyższego 2011, in: *Dziennik Ustaw*, nr. 253, poz. 1520.

<sup>14</sup> See Ustawa z dnia 11 lipca 2014 r. o zmianie ustawy – Prawo o szkolnictwie wyższym oraz niektórych innych ustaw 2014, in *Dziennik Ustaw*, poz. 1198 oraz Rozporządzenie Ministra Nauki i Szkolnictwa Wyższego z dnia 3 października 2014 r. w sprawie warunków prowadzenia studiów na określonym kierunku i poziomie kształcenia 2014, in *Dziennik Ustaw*, poz. 1370.

achieve these educational effects (depending on individual predispositions) in as many different ways as possible.

These changes have also triggered the need for a reconstruction of the higher education system in Poland. For instance, it has become necessary to establish Internal Education Quality Assurance Systems, the of aim which is to ensure the effective implementation of planned learning outcomes and, if the need occurs, to make the necessary corrections in the educational process. As an integral part of the teacher's work, an academic education plan was adopted, which was based not only on the design of classes, allowing for the achievement of learning outcomes, or for the selection of appropriate forms and methods of work with students, but also on reflection on effective methods of evaluation, which ensure a confirmation of their actual achievements. The empowerment of students, which enables them to decide on their own development path has resulted in the practice of academics' work with a greater emphasis on the use of active methods of education, differentiation of tasks and forms of evaluation (shaping, summarizing, continuous assessment) and techniques of confirming achievements (written, oral, observational, practical, *etc.*). Therefore, it has changed the role of teacher, who cannot be any longer a transmitter of knowledge and source of information, but more and more like a mentor-tutor supporting the student's learning. Thus, this requires a completely different approach to the teaching process at the university level, where the only constant is the learning outcome, and where the other components of this process (content, teaching methods and evaluation approaches) should be flexibly suited in the learning process to the specificities and needs of students<sup>15</sup>.

There is no doubt that the real reconstruction of the entire system of higher education in the spirit of the assumptions described above requires proper time. While the implementation of specific regulations at the university level requires specific and relatively imminent procedures, a possible change in the philosophy of education requires a whole range of long-term actions and necessitates the overcoming of many barriers and prejudices – both in the case of students and teachers.

### **The model of teacher education in universities**

Simultaneously, with the reform of higher education in Poland, there have also taken place changes in the scope of training candidates for the

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<sup>15</sup> Chmielecka, E. (2010) (ed.), *Autonomia programowa uczelni. Ramy kwalifikacji szkolnictwa wyższego*. Warszawa: Ministerstwo Nauki i Szkolnictwa Wyższego, pp. 103–104.

teaching profession at the academic level. Besides the general regulations applied to all types of faculties and courses of studies, there have also been established new standards for students' preparation for work in schools. Since the beginning of the 2000's, the current model of teacher training has been adapted in stages, focusing on the search for an optimal solution which would take into account a number of factors (long-term traditions, adaption to European standards, labor market needs, technological innovations, problems of contemporary schools, *etc.*). Various concepts for the preparation of candidates for the teaching profession were then considered: whether we need to maintain the existing educational model of the teacher-specialist with a deep but narrow general education, or whether we should move towards the concept of overall education, in which the teacher in a course of study gains multifaceted knowledge, good erudition skills and a general preparation for the job. Pedagogists and psychologists have argued, first of all, that it is important in teachers' education to prepare them for solving educational problems, hence they maintained that the emphasis should be put on the psychological-pedagogical competences of candidates for this profession. To counter allegations about the excessive theoretical knowledge gained by the students of the teaching specialization, voices were also raised for focusing more on education in different practical competences, but with the assumption that the ability of applying them is a guarantee of a teacher's professional success<sup>16</sup>.

These considerations were also accompanied by a discussion between particular research centers about the question of who this training of teachers in universities should be entrusted to: whether teachers should be instructed by the employees of research institutes focused on the particular scope of didactics which are located in different institutions or faculties, or whether they should create inter-departmental or inter-university centers of teacher training focused on education of students from all courses. In this context, external conditions were favorable, such as a diminution of the total number of students, lower interest in studies with a teaching specialization, a decreasing scientific community of educators, and changes in the financing of higher education. In fact, the basis of this discussion was determined by the idea of the modern teacher applied in Polish schools: whether he/she should be, above all, a good teacher and educator who specializes in

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<sup>16</sup> Koźmian, D. (2004). Współczesne tendencje i poszukiwania koncepcji edukacji nauczycielskiej. In Baran, B., Horyń, L. (2004). (Eds.), *Kształcenie nauczycieli w systemie studiów uniwersyteckich*. Szczecin: PPH Zapol Dmochowski-Sobczyk, p. 20.



teaching a particular subject, or a specialist in a particular subject/field who has the appropriate psychological-pedagogical preparation.

Another catalyst for change in the system of teacher training in Polish higher education were the guidelines of the European Union in this respect. According to the proposal of the European Commission in the EU, the teacher should, among other things, be able to work in multicultural and socially diverse groups, create favorable conditions for students' learning, incorporate communication technology into their everyday life, cooperate in a team, know how to elaborate the curricula and educational programs, collaborate with the local community, recognize and solve problems, constantly widen his/her knowledge and improve his/her skills. He also should be able to augment students' citizenship and positive social attitudes, preparing them to live in a society of knowledge. And at the very least, all the aforementioned competences must be optimally linked with the ability to teach a particular subject<sup>17</sup>. What can be seen in this set of European teacher's competences is the dominance of universal skills over specific ones with limited domains. As a result, the teacher in the EU is not recognized merely as a specialist-empiricist, but first and foremost as a teacher-educator. The European Commission has also proposed common rules for a teacher's work and optimal features expected from members of this profession. It was ascertained by the Commission that all teachers should graduate with a university degree of studies, also including knowledge about their subject, pedagogical knowledge, the ability to guide and support students, and an understanding of the social and cultural dimensions of education. A teacher's professional development, his/her training and improvement should last a lifetime, and be linked to mobility with the other European countries. They paid attention to the need for greater emphasis not only on involving candidates for the teaching profession in their research, but also on preparation of practical training<sup>18</sup>.

Then, the process of implementation of these recommendations in universities began in 2003 with the regulations of the Ministry of National Education and Sport regarding teachers' training standards, and a defining of the scope of academic preparation for the teaching profession in three areas: direct education (in the scope of subject or

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<sup>17</sup> Sielatycki, M. (2008). Kompetencje nauczyciela w Unii Europejskiej, In Krystyna Sujak-Lesz, K. (Ed.), *Kształcenie nauczycieli w szkole wyższej. Wybrane zagadnienia*. Wrocław: Oficyna Wydawnicza Atut, pp. 16–17.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, pp. 18–19.

educational work), teacher's education (in the scope of psychology, pedagogy, subject didactics, use of information and communication technologies in teaching), and pedagogical practices. However, this document shows that the teacher training model settled upon then has primarily assumed a preparation for teaching only one subject (thus, it was focused on specialized education), associated with the respective competences of teaching, and merely subsequently with the preparation in educational, social, creative, praxeological, communication and information-media focus<sup>19</sup>. Further changes in the Polish higher education system (implemented in the following academic year) were dictated directly by introducing a two-step system of studies: three years of bachelor's studies and two years of supplementary master's studies. Incidentally, this made the seemingly small but significant change in the concept of teacher training by introducing obligatory two-subject education (a so-called main and additional specialization), language knowledge (one foreign language at the advanced level B2 and B2+), and more and more presence of information technology. Towards the need for students' preparation to teach two school subjects, the number of hours devoted to psycho-pedagogical preparation was slightly reduced (from 150 to 120 hours per year) and the number of hours for teaching the subject in the scope of both specialties was increased (from 120 to 150 hours per year). The competences of candidates for the teaching profession were also divided according to two levels of studying: bachelor's studies allow for the preparation of work in primary and secondary schools, master's studies allow for work in secondary schools<sup>20</sup>. In the following years, two further attempts have been made to change teacher education standards in universities, but none of these measures materialized. Only from 2012 has there been performed a thorough reconstruction of the educational model for candidates for the teaching profession, then adapted to the requirements of the National Qualifications Framework and to the new conditions of studying programs in universities. According to the recommendations of the European Commission, greater emphasis was put on the universal competences of teachers and on their practical training (for instance, the obligatory

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<sup>19</sup> Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej i Sportu z dnia 23 września 2003 r. w sprawie standardów kształcenia nauczycieli (2003). In *Dziennik Ustaw*, nr. 170, poz. 1655.

<sup>20</sup> Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej i Sportu z dnia 7 września 2004 r. w sprawie standardów kształcenia nauczycieli (2004). In *Dziennik Ustaw*, nr. 207, poz. 2110.

psychological and pedagogical practices as well subject practices were introduced). The scope of psychological-pedagogical preparation was distinctly broadened, both at the level of general learning outcomes and in the way of approach of subject didactics, divided from this moment into general didactics and „subject didactics”. Finally, the allocation of time for the implementation of particular modules of teacher education was changed: by increasing the psycho-pedagogical part (from 120 to 150 hours of classes + 30 hours of practices thereof) and by decreasing the didactic part (from 150 to 120 hours + 120 hours of subject practices). Obligatory two-subject education has also been given up, and preparation for the teaching of a second subject has been transferred to an optional module of elective courses, so the range of teacher competences has become very limited (a bachelor's degree allows merely for teaching in primary schools, while a master's degree allows one to work in middle schools and secondary schools)<sup>21</sup>.

However, the process of developing an optimal model of teacher education in Poland at the academic level did not end with the implementation of the presented concepts. The constantly changing conditions of higher education and its functioning and financing have once again revived the debate about the direction of changes: the clash of tradition and modernity, the conflict between personal experiences and ideas born in other universities in our country and abroad. Therefore, there still remain valid questions: Who should we educate in studies with a teaching specialization (whether all those interested, or just selected in accordance with the obligatory principle e.g. in Germany and Sweden, which is focused on an elite education of very well-prepared candidates for the profession)? Where should we educate future teachers (in universities, research institutes, or pedagogical academies)? How should we educate them (by providing knowledge and skills for solving problems, or practicing the solving of problems with them by seeking for knowledge and acquiring skills)? What is the aim of the education (is it understood as a traditional way of education and upbringing, or rather as a way of arranging conditions for learning which is promoted in the constructivist spirit)<sup>22</sup>?

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<sup>21</sup> Rozporządzenie Ministra Nauki i Szkolnictwa Wyższego z dnia 17 stycznia 2012 r. w sprawie standardów kształcenia przygotowującego do wykonywania zawodu nauczyciela (2012). In *Dziennik Ustaw*, poz. 131.

<sup>22</sup> Czerepaniak-Walczak, M. O stawianiu się nauczycielem; niektóre pytania o kształcenie i doskonalenie nauczycieli. In Baran, B., Horyń, L. (Eds.), *Kształcenie nauczycieli*, p. 15.

## Conclusion

In recent years, the ongoing process of higher education reform has led to an increased interest in university didactics. It is difficult to imagine a project of profound change and its implementation in the academic education system without proper theoretical reflection and discussion of different concepts of teaching or the presenting of good practices. In the era of European integration and construction of an open system of higher education, allowing for free movement of students, especially important becomes the exchange of experience, not only within the university of a given country but also abroad. Without that we have no chance of developing optimal solutions.