

Abstract

During the last decade the Polish higher education has undergone a great transformation. The law on higher education voted in 1990, just after the systemic changes, is still ruling the system today. This law was the base of the development of private higher education and of the increasing autonomy of the state system.

The most important facts concerning this period are: the increase of the number of students, marketisation, and the creation of new diplomas corresponding to European norms.

Poland has 1 431 900 students, 56.9% are women (year 1999, source: GUS 2000). The number of students has increased by 455% since 1990. This increase has been accompanied by the development of the private sector. A third of students are registered in such schools, mostly in Finance, Banking and Management and Law. There are 174 private higher education institutions out of a total of 287 (among them fifteen universities). For 1999, the number of students registered in the first year in private institutions is almost equal to the number in state institutions.

A great part of the increase in the number of students is due to the development of evening, extramural, external and week-end courses. This could be considered a particularity of the Polish system. Students enrolled in daily courses represent only 46% of the total. These kind of daily studies are the only ones to be free of charges. A great deal of students registered in private higher education institutions come from the lower social classes and rural areas.

The Polish system is divided into universities and professional higher education institutions. Since 1997, professional high education institutions propose two stage-degrees: a bachelor degree (three years, "licencjat", or four years "Engineer") and a master's degree. This seems to better correspond to the needs of the economy towards intermediate management and at the same in accordance with the European model. A new law which is still in debate proposes to extend this system to the universities.

This reform raises a debate about what constitutes Higher Education. The main issues are the problem of the quality of studies, the financial autonomy of higher education institutions, the level of scientific activities and the management of academic staff's careers.

Concerning the academic staff the Polish system appears to be really hierarchical with many types of appointments. It is facing a difficult financial situation which forced most of academics to find supplementary job. In the last period, the

academic staff has become more and more feminised, even if at the top positions men are still the majority. But such a feminisation appears at a time where academic appointments are less and less interesting in comparison to the opportunities offered by the private sector. Which is the reason why one could say that women are "*winners among losers*".¹

¹ Siemienska R, 2000, "*Women in academe in Poland: winners among losers ?*", Higher Education in Europe, vol.XXV, n°2, Unesco.