

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC HIGHER VOCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN SPATIAL DECENTRALISATION OF PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION IN POLAND

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Abstract

The article discusses the rise of public higher vocational education (PHVE) in Poland in the context of active educational policy of many countries in the second half of the 20th century involving a spatial decentralisation of higher education. The first part of the article presents an outline of Polish PHVE policy. It serves as a basis for the article's latter sections concentrating on PHVE provision, its role in the Polish higher education system, relations between PHVE and other sectors of higher education in Poland, and the influence of PHVE creation on the accessibility (social and spatial) of higher education in Poland. The author tries to examine to what extent the implementation of the PHVE policy and the creation of the sector in Poland can be perceived as successful.

Key words: higher vocational education, educational policy, decentralisation, Poland.

INTRODUCTION

In the second half of the 20th century mass higher education has practically become an international standard (Altbach 1999; Brockliss 2000). Peter Hall, a British geographer and town-planner, observed in 1997 that by the 1990s, universities have become very commonplace that are located in almost every medium-sized European city (Hall 1997).

What greatly contributed to the popularisation of higher education in the world in the latter part of the 20th century was not only the growing demand, but also the conviction in Western countries in 1950s and 1960s that expansion of higher education would be one of key factors of economic growth (Teichler 2004; Raimer and Jacob 2011). Teichler (2004) underlines that the important tool for this expansion was increase of diversification within higher education. Experts assumed that

teaching does not need so strong concentration as research. As a result new forms of higher education institutions have started to emerge. The growing differentiation inside of higher education systems met the conditions of growing diversity of motives for studying and students' job (Teichler 2004).

Even though the diversification of higher education is a multi-dimensional problem (diversification of institutions, programs, degrees, quality, profiles etc.), the major issue in expansion of higher education since 1950s has concerned institutional diversification (Teichler 2004). Institutional diversification of higher education was a part of an active educational policy of many countries, involving a spatial decentralisation of higher education, mostly by setting up public higher vocational education institutions. In Western Europe this policy was introduced in the 1970s in such countries as Austria, Finland, France, Germany, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, and

Great Britain. On the one hand, the setting up public higher vocational education institutions were a response to an upsurge in demand for higher education in the conditions of limited possibilities of expanding the existing schools (Amaral and Teixeira 2000; Eliasson 2006). On the other hand, the governments sought to overcome wide inequalities in access to higher education, what has become a topic of great interest since 1960s, and appreciate its role in socio-economic development (Premfors 1984; Kjellström and Regnér 1999; Correia et al. 2002; Boucher et al. 2003; Andersson 2004, 2005; Daun and Hansson 2006; Benner and Sörlin 2007; Otero 2007).

The West European policy of the spatial decentralisation of higher education was one of the inspirations for the systemic solutions adopted in the post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe after 1989. In Poland, the biggest of them, was laying the foundations of public higher vocational education sector in 1997. Since this sector has been in existence here for more than a decade now, it is possible to assess its role in the Polish higher education system, and examine how far the rise of public higher vocational education has fulfilled the original hopes. Those are the issues this article will address.

EMERGENCE OF PUBLIC HIGHER VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IN POLAND

The first public higher vocational education institutions (PHVEIs) in Poland were set up in 1998 on the strength of the Higher Vocational Schools Act of 26 June 1997 (Law Gazette no. 26/1997, position 590). They were described as vocationally oriented higher schools only certified to conduct 1st-degree (undergraduate) studies, on completion of which the student was granted the title of a licentiate or engineer (an equivalent of a bachelor's degree). Like public academic schools, PHVEIs offer free intramural and paid extramural studies. The Higher Education Act of 2005 (Law Gazette no. 164/2005, position 1365) has extended the definition of a higher vocational school to include all higher schools not licensed to confer doctoral degrees, thus opening up the possibility of

organising master's studies in PHVEIs. In 2008 the first PHVEIs obtained the right to conduct 2nd-degree studies.

The setting up of PHVEIs in Poland (as in West European states) was intended to equalise access to higher education, especially for the youth from smaller towns and villages. As has been shown in a number of studies (e.g. Świerzbowska-Kowalik 2000; Beblo and Lauer 2004; Domański 2004; Kołaczek 2005; Dąbrowa-Szeffler and Jablecka-Pryślopska 2006), access to education in Poland, including the higher-level type, is unequal for young people from various areas, the inequality being especially pronounced for the urban and rural youth. This inequality is in contravention of the Polish Constitution, so PHVEIs were devised as a measure reducing inequalities in access to education resulting from the place of residence. It was assumed that PHVEIs were to be set up far from the major academic centres of the country, in areas of poor access to public higher education. In effect, they started to be established in subregional centres, mostly towns which had lost their status of regional capitals following the administrative reform of 1999. Their establishment was also part of the state's cushioning regional policy towards those towns, to minimise the damage resulting from the loss of the former status and some higher-order functions associated with it, and to soften the resistance of the local communities against the loss of the regional functions (Kaczmarek 1996). Out of the 26 former regional towns in which no independent public higher school had existed until 1997, by 2010 PHVEIs had appeared in 24 (92.3% of them). PHVEIs were also set up in 11 towns that had not been voivodeship capitals before 1999, and two were located in a town with a developed sector of public higher education (Opole and Koszalin).

Formally the setting up of PHVEIs takes place via an ordinance by the Council of Ministers. Usually PHVEI initiators were local authorities, local learned and cultural societies, and all kinds of economic organisations (NIK 2004; Drogosz-Zabłocka and Minkiewicz 2006). The key role of local authorities in setting up PHVEIs was largely due to the provisions of the Higher Vocational Schools Act of 26

June 1997 which stipulated that the state subsidies PHVEIs received could only go to the financing of teaching, material assistance for students, and financing or co-financing of an investment. Preparing the grounds and buildings and making them available to the institutions was the duty of the local and regional authorities. The authorities were obliged to transfer the buildings free of charge to the higher school being created and to take steps in order to ensure its teaching staff. To this end, they entered into agreements with representatives of major public universities, whose staff was to 'serve' the PHVEI being created. PHVEIs, like non-public higher schools, grew almost exclusively on staff working simultaneously at public academic schools located mostly in Poland's biggest academic centres. Since the teaching relied on people for whom work in PHVEIs was a second job, the problem of those schools was a relatively low level of instruction. This was an even bigger problem with many non-public higher schools based on the same staff resources, as evidenced by a report of the State Accreditation Committee (PKA 2007).

DISTRIBUTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE PHVEI NETWORK

The distribution of PHVEIs in Poland is uneven (Figure 1). They largely concentrate in southern and central Poland. This is mostly due to the factors of their establishment described above that involve the state's educational policy intended to improve the accessibility (spatial and social) of higher education outside the traditional academic centres (e.g. in geographically peripheral regions) and its cushioning policy towards towns that lost their status of regional capitals in 1999.

The PHVEI-establishing activity reached a peak in the first four years, between 1998 and 2001. A total of 23 such units came into existence then (64% of all those operating in the academic year 2010/2011). The number of newly created PHVEIs varied widely from year to year (Figure 2), with a record nine set up in 1998. What strikes one in this pattern is a decline in their number in 1999 and 2000 and its sudden jump in 2001. Political factors are often cited in explanation, like a rise in the PHVEI-founding

activity in periods preceding parliamentary elections (in this case those of 2001 and 2005).

In the academic year 2010/2011, total PHVEI enrolment was 87,200 of which 66% were intramural students. In that year 1.84 million persons studied in Poland, which means that PHVEIs accounted for 4.7%. Since academic year 2006/2007, when the number of PHVEI students exceeded 100,000 one may observe a downward tendency concerning the size and share of this sector (in 2006/2007 PHVEIs accounted for 5.1% of students in Poland). In the academic year 2010/2011 there were substantial differences in enrolment among individual PHVEIs. The leaders were the schools in Legnica (5,500), Tarnów (4,900), Nowy Sącz (4,900), Krosno (4,200), Nysa (4,100) and Kalisz (4,000). The smallest PHVEIs had from 200 to 1000 students (Koszalin, Walcz, and Skierniewice). Decreasing number of students in Polish higher education and PHVEI sector has changed the situation of individual schools. Between 2004 and 2006 the number of students of the largest PHVEIs was substantially higher, comparable with the figures for the smallest of multidisciplinary public academic schools (e.g. there were 10,300 students in PHVEI in Jaroslaw in 2004, 7,400 students in PHVEI in Legnica in 2006, 5,700 students in PHVEI in Kalisz in 2006).

PROGRAMS OF STUDY OFFERED BY PHVEIS

In the academic year 2010/2011, PHVEIs had 391 certificates to conduct bachelor (licentiate) studies in 73 undergraduate programs and 13 certificates to conduct master studies in 9 postgraduate programs. On average, one school offered six licentiate-level courses. Out of 391 certificates, more than 40% (167) embraced the ten most popular courses, including nursing (24 schools), English philology (21 schools), pedagogy (21), German philology (19) and information science (17). A list of the most often offered courses conducted by PHVEIs is presented in Table 1.

Worth noting is the difference between the PHVEI educational offer and that of the sector of non-public universities, which also emerged after 1989.



Figure 1 Distribution of PHVEIs in the academic year 2010/2011.

Source: compiled on the basis of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education data.

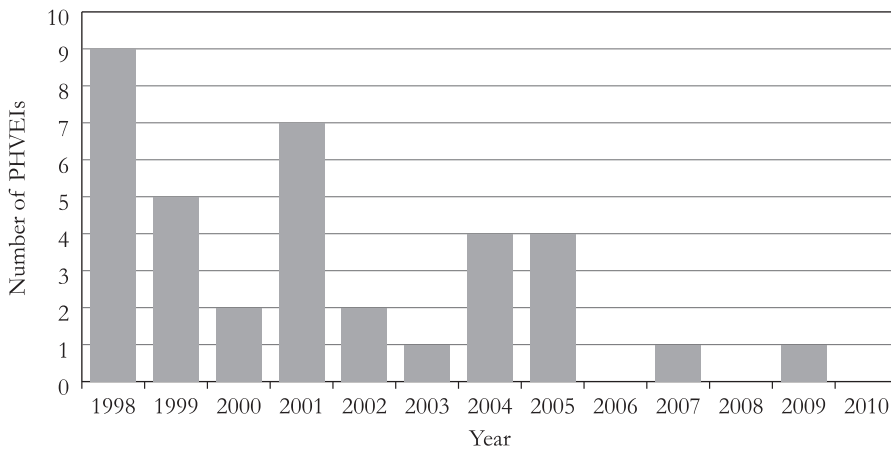


Figure 2 Number of PHVEIs set up in the years 1998–2010.

Source: compiled on the basis of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education data.

Table 1 Programs of undergraduate study most often offered in PHVEIs in the academic year 2010/11.

Source: compiled on the basis of Ministry of Science and Higher Education data.

Direction of study	Number of schools	% of schools	Direction of study	Number of schools	% of schools
Nursing	24	67	Management	10	28
English philology	21	58	Administration	9	25
Pedagogy	21	58	Construction	9	25
German philology	19	53	Cosmetology	9	25
Information science	17	47	Emergency medical services	9	25
Polish philology	14	39	Political science	8	22
Physical education	14	39	Agriculture	8	22
Economy	13	36	Finance and banking	7	19
Mechanics and machine building	12	33	Physiotherapy	7	19
Tourism and recreation	12	33	Management and production engineering	7	19

In the latter, the dominance of humanistic, social and economic courses is much more overwhelming than in PHVEIs owing to low education costs involved and a great demand for them. While in the Polish PHVEIs humanistic and social studies account for the biggest proportion, 39.6%, of all those offered, the next places go to technical and exact sciences (26.6%) and to medical studies, including physical education (16.4%). Economic studies make up a mere 12.5% of the total. Special attention should be paid to the structure of the technology and science curricula in PHVEIs: information science does not feature on them as prominently as in non-public schools. Almost equally often PHVEIs offer mechanics and machine building as well as construction – fields almost absent from non-public higher education institutions (primarily owing to the high costs of education. The important role of medical studies stems from formal circumstances: nurses and emergency medical

service specialists, due to changes in Polish law, are obligated to hold at least undergraduate degree. A high proportion of the technical, exact and medical disciplines in the PHVEI education structure reinforces their role in the higher education system; in fact, they are the only higher schools in small and medium-sized towns that offer the technical education in great demand on the local labour markets.

It seems that the stronger technical orientation of Polish PHVEIs than of non-public schools, despite higher costs of organising and conducting some of the courses and specialities, could have been a major help in acquiring teaching staff. This is corroborated by the fact that a substantial proportion of PHVEI staff is workers of public technical universities who, until the emergence of the PHVEI sector, had limited opportunities of finding a second job in non-public schools where technical curricula were a rarity.

LOCATION OF PHVEIs AND THE ACCESSIBILITY OF PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION

Changes in the accessibility of higher education through the establishment of PHVEIs are studied by assessment of their role in a spatial deconcentration of higher education; in particular, the role they play outside the traditional higher education centres.

By 2010, PHVEIs had been set up in 36 towns whose population ranged from 18,000 (Sulechów) to 129,000 (Opole). Ten schools were created in towns with more than 100,000 inhabitants, fifteen in those with 50,000 to 100,000, and eleven in units with under 50,000.

Although by assumption PHVEIs were to be located in smaller cities outside the traditional higher education centres, there appeared local initiatives to establish them also in some of those centres (e.g. in Bielsko-Biala, Gliwice, Koszalin, Poznań, and Radom). The initiatives came largely from the cities whose public higher schools only included those with a technical profile (Bielsko-Biala, Gliwice, Koszalin and Radom). The PHVEIs they applied for were intended to offer mostly humanistic and social types of education (usually pedagogy and philology). It was hoped that a PHVEI would be a school that could merge in the future with a public higher academic school in order to create a university.

The formation of PHVEIs outside the traditional higher education centres was the chief factor of deconcentration of public higher education after 1989. In the academic year 2010/2011, out of the 116,400 students enrolled in public higher schools outside the traditional centres (i.e. outside the academic centres that had existed before 1989), as many as 85,500 (73.7%) were accounted for by PHVEIs. Even higher was the share of PHVEIs in the intramural education of students of public higher schools (81.3%).

PHVEIs have also played a considerable role in the deconcentration of entire higher education in Poland. In the academic year 2010/2011, there were

231,400 students studying outside the traditional higher education centres, of which 36.9% were enrolled in PHVEIs. Especially high was the share of PHVEIs in the number of intramural students (65.1%). Such a big role of PHVEIs in the intramural mode of education outside the traditional higher education centres resulted from the fact that non-public higher schools, especially those located in smaller towns, primarily offered the extramural way of studying, while in PHVEIs intramural students made up as much as two-thirds of total enrolment.

The above analysis shows that PHVEIs are the most important type of higher school outside the traditional higher education centres, because they account for most of the seats in the intramural mode of study, including close to 80% of seats in free intramural studies (i.e. at public higher schools). The prime factor of this unprecedented quantitative success of PHVEIs is their quasi-competitive advantage over private higher schools resulting largely from the fact that PHVEIs offer free intramural studies. As has been shown by e.g. Kolasiński, Kulig and Lisiecki (2003), the absence of the tuition fee is one of the two most important factors in the choice of a public higher school as a place of study. Other authors have found that the location and development of PHVEIs in a town had a detrimental impact on the formation, development and economic situation of non-public higher schools there. First, the establishment of a PHVEI in a locality with no non-public higher school greatly reduced the probability of one being set up there (Bajerski 2011). Secondly, the establishment of a PHVEI in a locality where non-public higher schools were already in operation caused a dramatic drop in their enrolment, and hence a serious worsening of their financial situation (Drogosz-Zablocka and Minkiewicz 2006). Not surprisingly, the above processes have led to frequent criticism of the PHVEI sector, especially by representatives of non-public higher schools, who accuse them of unfair competition and demand either the introduction of a fee into public higher schools, or subsidies for non-public higher schools for student education.

The location of PHVEIs has changed also spatial accessibility to higher education. The question of

spatial accessibility assumes special importance in the case of public higher education, hence also PHVEIs, because it involves the accessibility of formally free education. In the simplest approach, the spatial accessibility of public higher education is expressed as the distance from the student's place of residence to the place of location of a public higher school (cf. Nowosielska 2002). This is significant because for many potential students the factor that limits their chance of taking up studies is the high cost of maintenance in a big academic centre and of the journey to it. Education-related expenses are the lowest in the case of daily journeys to a public university from the place of residence. This is corroborated by the areas from which PHVEIs derive their students: the majority come from the nearest counties (Sobala-Gwosdz 2005; Borowiec 2007; Makiela et al. 2008; Bajerski 2009). It also fits in with the results obtained to date, which reveal the largest group of PHVEI students to be persons coming from small and medium-sized towns and villages (Szulc 2004; Makiela et al. 2008). What is more, they are mostly interested in free intramural studies. According to the 2004 report by the Supreme Inspection Chamber, about 75% of all PHVEI candidates applied for intramural studies there (NIK 2004). From the point of view of the constitutional guarantee of equal educational chances and access to free education, the deconcentration of Polish higher education through the establishment of PHVEIs has attained its aims. The improved spatial accessibility of public higher education has been followed by its greater social accessibility (as corroborated by studies of derivation of PHVEI students, cf. Szulc 2004, Makiela et al. 2008). This fact was also confirmed as early as 2004 by the Supreme Inspection Chamber in its report on the activity of PHVEIs (NIK 2004).

DISCUSSION: THE ROLE AND THE FUTURE OF PHVEIS IN POLAND

In the light of the data and results published to date, one can conclude that the development of PHVEIs has contributed to both, a great improvement in the spatial accessibility of public higher education and to its spatial deconcentration. There is also evidence that they have improved its social accessibility

as well. In 2010 PHVEIs were the most important higher schools outside the traditional academic centres. Their role was reinforced by a structure of the educational offer favourable to local labour markets and a quasi-competitive advantage over non-public higher schools resulting from their offer of free intramural studies.

In terms of the targets they were supposed to attain, the development of PHVEIs to date seems largely a success story. The only aspects of their operation that should be assessed as negative are the still low level of education and their rather negligible effect on stimulating local processes of economic growth. Since in most cases those higher schools lack a scientific-teaching staff of their own, they can hardly co-operate with local firms. They influence the economy of the locality in which they are situated largely indirectly, through their students bearing various consumer cost (the role of the size of a school's own research staff in stimulating the processes of economic growth has been confirmed by studies carried out in other countries, cf. e.g. Andersson et al. 2004, 2005; Andersson 2005). To a slight extent, PHVEIs may also contribute to an accumulation of human capital resources, because about two-thirds of their graduates enrol in 2nd-degree studies after migrating to another (usually bigger) academic centre (Bajerski 2009). This is largely due to the still low prestige of the licentiate (bachelor) degree in Poland, which means that in terms of jobs and wages, a master's degree opens up much wider possibilities (Diagnoza Społeczna 2009).

On the basis of the development pattern of the PHVEI sector to date and tendencies of demographic, socio-economic and legal-administrative change, one can identify three factors which are going to affect its status in the years to come.

First, as has been mentioned earlier, the Higher Education Act of 2005 gave PHVEIs the possibility of conducting 2nd-degree studies, of which the first schools took advantage already in 2008. In the successive years they will gradually transform into units ever closer to academic schools. There have been some much-publicised announcements by the

authorities of several PHVEIs of plans to obtain certificates to confer doctoral degrees too over the next few years. However, in accordance with the Polish regulations, this would involve the acquisition of highly skilled scientific staff for PHVEIs as the principal workplace, hence the end of their dependence on public academic schools for staff. A fast development of this type seems rather dubious.

Secondly, it seems that unless fees are introduced into public higher schools from above and PHVEIs lose their free intramural studies, they will be less susceptible to the demographic crisis that has already started to grip Polish higher education than non-public higher schools. The crisis appeared when the ever-shrinking generations of the demographic depression period started to reach the student age. According to a demographic forecast by the Central Statistical Office in Warsaw, the number of people aged 19-24 will fall from 3.9 million in 2005 to 2.8 million in 2015 (GUS 2004). What speaks in favour of PHVEIs is their peripheral situation (far from the country's biggest academic centres) and a quasi-competitive advantage over non-public higher schools. This prediction is largely supported by the processes taking place in Portuguese higher education, where PHVEIs have followed a similar development path in similar legal conditions (cf. Amaral and Teixeira 2000, 2001; Correia et al. 2002). The Portuguese experience shows that at a time of a demographic crisis, PHVEIs tend to cope equally well as the public university sector, while non-public higher schools grapple with the most serious problems. What is more, as has been shown by Sobala-Gwosdz (2005, 2007), in some regions of Poland PHVEIs have already grown to be a competition for universities limiting the range of their spatial impact. The first data on students population shrinkage shows that in peripheral subregions where PHVEIs compete with non-public higher schools, they have been less susceptible to the demographic crisis. Between the years 2006 and 2010 peripheral PHVEIs lost 12% of students comparing to 18% in the case of non-public higher schools.

It seems that, in the long run, the demographic crisis threatening many higher schools may help PHVEIs

to change into the principal workplace for scientific staff. Given the prospect of reductions in teaching posts that faces Polish universities over the nearest years, some of their employees and graduates of doctoral studies may consider taking up work in PHVEIs. In addition, ending their dependence on staff from other universities might also help to solve, at least partly, one of the greatest problems of PHVEIs in Poland, viz. the low level of instruction. This problem, if the State Accreditation Committee is reliable in its assessment (PKA 2007), is even more serious in non-public higher schools, and is characteristic of most of the post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe (cf. Fried et al. 2006; Kwiec 2006).

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a ostatními sektory vyššího vzdělávání v Polsku a na vliv veřejného vyššího odborného vzdělávání na dostupnost (sociální a prostorovou) vyššího vzdělávání v Polsku. Autor zkoumá, do jaké míry mohou být politika veřejného vyššího odborného vzdělávání a vznik tohoto sektoru v Polsku považovány za úspěšné.

Résumé

Role veřejných vyšších odborně vzdělávacích institucí v prostorové decentralizaci veřejného vyššího vzdělávání v Polsku

Článek se zabývá vzestupem veřejného vyššího odborného vzdělávání v Polsku v kontextu aktivní vzdělávací politiky mnoha zemí ve druhé polovině dvacátého století včetně prostorové decentralizace vyššího vzdělávání. V první části článku nastiňujeme charakter polské politiky veřejného vyššího odborného vzdělávání. Tato část slouží jako báze pro další části, které se soustředí na zajištění veřejného vyššího odborného vzdělávání, na jeho roli v polském systému vyššího vzdělávání, na vztahy mezi veřejným vyšším odborným vzděláváním