

MINISTERSTWO NAUKI I SZKOLNICTWA WYŻSZEGO

KOMITET POLITYKI NAUKOWEJ

on the “Excellence Initiative – Research University” Programme

Introduction

The Scientific Policy Council (Komitet Polityki Naukowej – KPN) for the Ministry of Science and Higher Education would like to draw the attention of the Experts evaluating Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) for the “Excellence Initiative – Research University” Programme to certain key issues. The reform of science and higher education that was passed in 2018 offers HEIs an opportunity for increased organizational autonomy. At the same time, the dependence of the state subsidy on the quality of research performance will gradually increase. These two elements enable and should promote deep and thorough changes at various level of HEIs’ structure, but different HEIs adopted different approaches to addressing the challenges of the reform.

The main objective of the Programme is to identify HEIs in Poland that have the highest potential to improve their quality of research and teaching, strengthen international collaboration and develop management practices that will promote scientific excellence. The selected HEIs will receive a state subsidy increased by 10% annually for 6 years. While this is a substantive increase, the Council would like to emphasise the non-pecuniary impact of the competition. The Programme will identify and reward institutions that are setting an example how to strive for excellence. Not only will this give them the prestige and economic advantage over the remaining HEIs, but also will be decisive for the long-term consequences of the reform of higher education. Many HEIs, in particular their management, are strongly motivated to receive the Research University status. Thus, the Programme can be used as a strong and unique incentive to promote thorough changes in Polish HEIs. The Council believes that Research Universities program has a tremendous potential and can play a key role in the transformation of the Polish research environment. In fact, there are no other mechanisms that might have a similar effect.

This present document focuses on the challenges and shortcomings of the Polish science and higher education system, thus it presents an inevitably one-sided picture. We would like to stress that there are many excellent and very good researchers in Poland. Strong and internationally renowned units and institutions exist which are organized and managed according to the best international practices (in this document we refrain from naming any examples to maintain impartiality). Thus, excellent world-class research and modern science

management are possible in Poland. In the opinion of the Council the aim of the “Excellence Initiative – Research University” Programme is to identify the Universities that are most likely to catch up with those fore-runners, but most importantly to create the best conditions and opportunities for excellent researchers. Therefore, the program’s results should not reproduce the results of the regular evaluation procedure, which takes into account a number of different factors (research excellence being just one of them) and rewards current status/resources rather than changes introduced or planned.

The context

This document is based on two key sources:

i) *2017 Peer Review Report on Poland’s Higher Education and Science System*, by the Horizon 2020 Policy Support Facility, commissioned by the Ministry prior to the reform.¹ The report identified very well a number of key features and important challenges of the Polish higher education system, and its conclusions strongly reverberated with the reform-oriented scientific community in Poland. The MESSAGE 2 of the *2017 Peer Review Report* stated:

“Ensure effective governance and regulation. Facilitate the development of sufficient, professional and executive leadership in public higher education institutions in line with their profiles.

*Modern complex institutions cannot be governed effectively and exploit the benefit of autonomy without leadership that satisfies external demands for accountability as well as the need for collegial influence. This implies strengthening institutional autonomy but balancing it with accountability through three key actions: (i) **strengthening the power of executive management** within institutions, including appointed leadership and management; (ii) **reducing the power and influence of collegial bodies**; and (iii) establishing governing bodies with **external stakeholders** in all types of higher education institutions.”*

KPN finds this paragraph to be a succinct, yet highly informative summary of the main organizational challenges faced by Polish Higher Education Institutions.

ii) other/previous analysis, documents and recommendations of the KPN.

The issues

In this context the Council would like to draw the Experts’ attention to issues and areas of Polish HEIs’ practice and organization (listed in no particular order) that are most important in the context of the 2018 reform. One of the aims of the “Excellence Initiative – Research

¹ <https://rio.jrc.ec.europa.eu/en/policy-support-facility/peer-review-polish-higher-education-and-science-system>

University” Programme is promotion of quality research and the key goal is to create the best working conditions for scientists with the highest potential to perform high-quality internationally visible science. Other goals include improving the quality of teaching and improvement of management structure. A general, over-arching issue is the internationalization of Polish HEIs – it is present in many of the points below.

We would like to point out that all the items below need to be viewed in the context of the comprehensive reform of the Polish science system (termed Act 2.0). The key element of this new regulation is to significantly expand universities’ autonomy and the “Excellence Initiative – Research University” programme offers a prime incentive to encourage the use of this autonomy for the introduction of effective changes on numerous levels of the universities’ structure.

Some of the elements listed below may be obvious from the perspective of countries with well-developed science systems. However, many of them are still not widely adopted in the Polish system and Research University program offers an opportunity to promote them. The aim of this present document is not to influence any decisions made by the Experts, but to highlight the most significant shortcomings of the Polish system that the HEIs can be encouraged to deal with in the context of the “Excellence Initiative – Research University” Programme.

Governance and academic management and responsibility structure

The main governance challenge is the lack of strong leadership at all levels, combined with the disproportionately large influence of collegial bodies. This is cherished as “academic democracy”, yet has few management benefits. There is also the lack of external oversight, and the principle of an external board has been widely criticised as an infringement on academic freedom.

The key leadership positions are frequently filled in a random and non-transparent manner, and the leader’s activities are not subject to systematic review and evaluation in the context of the institutional strategy. The structure of academic management and responsibility is complex, with different bodies and units having overlapping and conflicting competencies. Decisions of one body can be revoked by another, or several bodies make a decision on the same issue. The internal units of the Polish HEIs (e.g. faculties, departments, but also administrative units), enjoy a high-level of autonomy in terms of management (finances, appointments, teaching and research). It is not utilised to stimulate entrepreneurship at the faculty level, but rather to make decisions in a collegiate manner and to define the internal, unit-specific standards of appointments, promotions and evaluation. This autonomy significantly hampers the managerial capacity of the universities as a whole, and reduces their ability to introduce strategic reforms.

According to KPN, the following changes would be the most beneficial given the above diagnosis and the broader Polish context. The governance structure at various levels should be made conducive to effective management and should involve external advisory bodies. It is important that the competencies and responsibilities of particular units/bodies are clearly defined and delineated, and leaders are evaluated in the context of institutional goals and performance. Well-defined procedures for conflict solution should be instilled. According to the new regulations, the total amount of funding will be given to the Institution, which will be able to allocate it to particular faculties and other units. KPN believes this should be used as a strategy and development tool. The Act 2.0 introduced University boards, which have a significant potential to steer the changes, but that potential would be even higher, if they included international members. Likewise, external international experts could be called upon to assist with designing and implementation of structural changes.

Research output

Analyses of bibliometric data show that Polish scholars are productive, but many prefer to publish in local journals and with local publishers instead of international ones.² This has an obviously negative impact on their visibility and impact on science internationally. Their work is hardly cited, but this does not prevent their promotion to professorship due to the lack of systematic and transparent benchmarks for quality and career development assessment. These problems are particularly visible in social sciences and humanities. These points are well illustrated by the recent analysis of the candidates for Rada Doskonałości Naukowej (a central body responsible for processing degrees and titles procedures – the members of the RDN are supposed to be the most accomplished academics) and analysis of the international visibility of research published by Polish researchers. The former shows that, based on Scopus, the median of citations and Hirsch Index for candidates in Social Sciences, Humanities and Theology is 0 (zero).³ The latter shows that between 2013 and 2016 there was a significant variation in terms of the proportion of research output published in journals indexed in WoS, with the median in some disciplines being as high as 80%, and others as low as 25% or even 0.⁴ A large proportion of academics employed as researchers do not attract research funding of any kind, and the total number of ERC grants in Poland so far is 30 (https://www.kpk.gov.pl/?page_id=19321, in Polish).

² For an example of social sciences and humanities, see http://ekulczycki.pl/warsztat_badacza/polscy-naukowcy-z-nauk-spoecznych-i-humanistycznych-raport-o-produktywnosci/. In Polish.

³ In Polish, http://ekulczycki.pl/warsztat_badacza/rdn/

⁴ In Polish, http://ekulczycki.pl/warsztat_badacza/miedzynarodowa-widocznosc-prac-polskich-naukowcow-wszystkie-dyscypliny/

The problems above could be addressed by implementing mechanisms improving research staff performance, especially to attract more external funding and to increase international impact of research carried out at a given institution. Ideally, these mechanisms should be tailored to the needs of different disciplines/areas and implemented as a university-wide strategy. They should be at the core of the HEI's restructuring and new organization. Successful implementation of these mechanisms would be helped by the presence of internationally renowned academics in leading management positions.

Excessive teaching obligations

The majority of HEIs research staff are employed on teaching-and-research contracts, and their teaching load is substantive (on average, between 6 and 8 full courses a year). This, especially when accompanied by poor administrative support, is at odds with research activities and has a negative impact on their quality. The high teaching load is accompanied by a related administrative burden. The system so far was rewarding financially high student enrolment, which resulted in the teaching obligations increasing even more. High teaching load is often cited by younger researchers as the main obstacle to increasing their research productivity and the quality of their output. At the same time, curriculum is often designed to match the qualifications of the staff rather than to fit the needs of the students.

In our opinion, in the light of an expected increased quality of teaching and research output the teaching obligations should be properly managed. For example, teaching obligations must be matched with the experience and qualifications of the staff, but students need to be offered training that is similar in terms of both quality and profile to what is provided at reputable international HEIs. The teaching "burden" needs to be balanced taking into account junior vs senior status of the faculty, as well as their level of research activities. It is advisable that there is administrative arrangement in place to relieve the academic staff of the administrative teaching-related burden. It is extremely important that there exist transparent regulations for the assignment of teaching obligations and such decisions are not made arbitrarily.

Career path

Under the Polish law, academic appointments are subject to open competition, publically advertised and merit-based. In reality, the appointment procedures are usually ignored and the appointments are made internally, including the "inheritance" of the leadership positions by the retiring leader's appointees. The position advertisements are often phrased in a way that privileges a given candidate, and women are often discriminated against. The positions are often advertised to provide employment for individuals with strong links to the Institution rather than to contribute to the unit's/Institution's development and competitiveness. This makes the academic quality of the candidate a secondary matter. In

other words, there is no excellence culture. There is a lack of the link between the type and quality of the contract (including remuneration) and the individual academic performance. Instead, the conditions of employment are based on age (disguised as a career stage/academic seniority). While the adverse effects of all of this on the research quality and output are obvious, this situation has also strong negative effects on the quality of supervision and training provided for the PhDs.

In our view, all kinds of mechanisms reducing the rate of 'in-breeding' should be implemented. The proportion of internationally-educated academic staff, especially at the junior level, should increase. A significant number of leadership position appointments needs to be made to the external candidates. The quality of PhD supervision should be improved by introducing academic performance-related requirements for supervisors. Finally, the mobility of individual researchers needs to be encouraged.

Young independent researchers

Securing external funding, even if highly prestigious, does not provide young researchers with independence and leverage. In particular, efforts to establish one's own research group tends to encounter serious obstacles, because of the lack of internal regulation and structure that would reinforce young researchers' independent position. They lack administrative capacity that would be required to parallel their research capacity and achievements. Their weak position has a negative impact on their relations with the administration, as well as other research staff. The role of 'habilitation' was significantly reduced by the Act 2.0. Yet, it still plays a strong role in the system, also for historical reasons, and often slows down the path to independence.

In our view the high level of flexibility, as introduced by the new law (Act 2.0) should be used to promote the independence and influence of young team leaders. They need to be included in the decision-making bodies. The organizational structure needs to define the status of independent researchers and their groups, so that their relation to other academic and administrative units is clear. There should exist clear and transparent procedures of evaluation and promotion of young team leaders. Fast-track promotion or other independence-facilitating mechanisms need to be introduced.

Administrative support

An important deficit of HEIs in Poland is their administrative support structures. On the one hand, often seriously underpaid and neglected, on the other unprofessional and unfriendly. Their role is particularly important in the context of the complex and unclear Polish regulations, such as the Public Procurement Law. However, administrative support structures tend to have their own goals that frequently do not align with either individual

researchers' goals or the strategy of the Institution as a whole. In particular, the strong hierarchy and multiplication of procedures, the inefficient processing of documents are accompanied by the lack of expertise and up-to-date information. Administrative departments from different units rarely communicate and exchange information, and the quality of support provided may differ radically between units of the same institution. The inertia and unwillingness to apply innovative solutions hamper researchers' productivity and innovativeness. Administrative support structures are also able, and capable, of seriously obstructing the research process – instead of solving problems they often create them. A specific culture in which administration's goals are more important than the aims of researchers is present in many institutions. It is a standard practice to use project overheads to pay an extra fee to the administrative support employees, which creates an imbalance in the treatment of those who do and do not have external funding. It is also an accepted practice to employ a "manager", i.e. a person responsible for the contacts between the researchers and the administrative support, including carrying out the administrative unit's duties (e.g. reporting). Last but not least, vast majority of the administrative support is done in Polish and many administration employees do not speak English, which largely excludes international researchers.

KPN finds it very important that the structure of responsibility of the administrative units is clearly defined. The horizontal and vertical communication needs to be improved. Importantly, the administration needs to change in parallel with the changes in the research and teaching structures. It is an imperative that the performance of the administrative support is monitored and evaluated regularly and that active researchers are involved in the evaluation process. Moreover, proper incentives need to be introduced that promote proactive, professional and friendly attitude toward researchers. It is crucial for internationalization that the administrative support is also available in English.