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Educational policy

Summary

DEFINITION OF THE TERM: Educational policy refers to the activities, objectives, strategies, and regulations created by public authorities that are related to education.

DISCUSSION OF THE TERM: The aim of the article is to review the key dimensions of and the problems faced by educational policy. The key task within educational policy is to define the role that the state will play in it. Is this role restricted to planning and organizing educational services, or does the state also play a role in providing educational policy? Other important tasks of any education system include establishing the degree of decentralization and the autonomy of the educational institutions, defining the systems to be used for qualifications and their verification, and determining the length of the period of universal education, within which students follow a standardized core curriculum. Educational policy also shapes the supply of secondary school graduates, the supply of places available at universities, and the supply of graduates to the labour market. Another significant dimension of educational policy is regulation of the teaching profession (open versus rigid models of professional advancement). Other aspects of educational policy discussed in the article include the format for measuring educational results and an evaluation of the educational systems and institutions of specific countries, with particular focus on the international assessment of students' knowledge and skills.

SYSTEMATIC REFLECTION WITH CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: Formally, the education system in Poland is highly decentralised, but in practice the decisions of local governments and school principals are limited by central regulations concerning the employment

and remuneration of teachers. Schools have a great deal of freedom in selecting teaching methods, but the content of teaching is defined by the core curriculum introduced in 2015, which significantly limits the autonomy of schools, and learning outcomes are assessed by central external examinations.

Keywords: education, educational policy in Poland, teachers, evaluation of qualifications, evidence-based policy

Educational policy refers to activities, objectives, strategies, and regulations that are related to education, and which have been created by the government and its subordinate institutions or (in decentralised systems) by local governments or other entities (e.g. school districts or university associations). Educational policy focuses primarily on formal education, i.e. organised education that leads to specific, state-recognised qualifications, and defines the conditions and support granted to non-formal education. In practice, educational policy focuses on the period from pre-school to higher education, adult education, and vocational training. Due to significant differences in organisation and funding and different objectives and challenges, distinctions are made between educational policy that covers the school system and early education, educational policy that covers higher education, and educational policy that covers adult education. In recent years, educational policy that covers vocational training has been added that is more concerned with the relationship between formal education and the continuous development of competences in the workplace.

Public, private, and other forms of education

The key task in educational policy is to define the role that is played in it by the state. There are education systems in which the state not only plans and organises educational services but also provides them. There are also systems in which the state defines the general principles of how the system operates and plays a part in deciding how it is financed, while the provision of services is primarily handled by private entities. In the vast majority of countries, access to primary education is universal and it is guaranteed by the state. This involves both state funding and regulations concerning the core curriculum, qualifications, and teachers' employment, as well as the requirements for completing each stage of education. In most developed countries, schools are run by state entities which are managed by central or local units. In the European Union in 2017, 86% of primary school pupils attended state schools, and only 14% attended schools run by non-state entities¹. The exception is

1 Eurostat data calculated in October 2019 based on educ_uoe_enrp04 indicator.

countries such as the Netherlands, where for historical reasons local governments and NGOs (usually with religious affiliations) have an equal right to run schools, but their activities are usually financed by the state. Typically, private entities are more important in vocational and higher education. In the EU in 2016, 27% of all students attended private higher education institutions.²

Given the fact that state entities predominate in most education systems, but non-state (i.e. private or independent) entities also operate in these systems, it is vital to know how these entities are financed and how to choose between them. Debates on school voucher systems and choice of school touch on the basic issue of the role of the state in the provision of public services. Usually, the distinguishing feature of non-state schools is the fact that they are fee-paying institutions and can follow their own regulations regarding the employment of teachers. However, issues such as the core curriculum, examination standards, or the need for evaluation/inspection by external entities are usually regulated by the state. The exception is the Netherlands, whose constitution guarantees considerable freedom in the establishing and functioning of schools; for this reason, there is no national document that defines the core curriculum in this country. Countries where state education was built alongside non-state institutions or was even based on them, e.g. the USA or the UK, impose far fewer requirements on non-state schools.

A simple division between state and private education is misleading, as most systems combine state support with obligations that are imposed by the state and allow different degrees of responsibility to be shared between state, independent, and private entities. American charter schools are a good example here. US regulations differ between the states, but they are largely state funded, and they play a similar role to that of state schools as they cannot select students or charge parents. The latter two characteristics set them apart from private schools, but they have the freedom to manage the school (or the school network) and define the curriculum and employment conditions of their teachers. Similarly, there are many independent schools in Poland (*szkoły społeczne*) that are run by NGOs, individuals, or religious associations. These schools may operate as state institutions and they may receive

2 Source as above, educ_uoe_enrt01 indicator.

financial support from the state for their expenses, including teachers' salaries, but they cannot select students or charge parents. They may also operate as non-state schools and be subject to similar rules as private schools. In many countries, such indirect arrangements are popular, and the private and non-state school sector is usually small. In most countries, (Germany is an exception), home schooling is also possible, but this only applies to a fraction of schoolchildren.

The same division is found at the level of higher education, where state and private entities differ primarily in terms of the possibility of charging students and obtaining the state's financial support; however, both compete for the same resources, e.g. for research. Polish universities – both state and private – are a good example here. State universities charge fees to students who enlist in programmes that are outside of their general full-time courses, while private universities can receive some financial support from the state, and they compete for the same resources for research as state universities. In Poland, money for education 'follows' the pupil, and – to a certain extent – the university student, although in higher education financing correlates with the academic staff, research, and other tasks. In education, money is allocated to the common budget of local government units by means of an educational algorithm and educational subsidy; in higher education, money is allocated to the university budget. Only independent and private schools receive funds that are dependent on the number of students that attend a given school. More radical solutions that were tested in, for example, several US and Chilean states, allowed students to choose their schools, even schools that were outside of their area of residence, and the money for their education was allocated directly to those schools. This is highly controversial, as market mechanisms may lead to the underfunding of local schools and a further deterioration of the quality of education available to less mobile families.

Organisation and finances

A key characteristic of any education system is the degree of its decentralisation and the autonomy of the educational institutions. Decentralisation is understood as the delegation of powers to local state units

or local government units. In some countries, education is managed by special state institutions, e.g. by school boards in the USA or the Netherlands. In the USA, these constitute a separate administration with its own finances and elections; in the Netherlands, school boards only manage schools that are financed primarily from central funds. In the Nordic countries in recent decades, the management of education was almost entirely delegated to local governments. In Poland, the vast majority of educational establishments are under the responsibility of communes (*gmina*) and counties (*powiat*). In other countries, education can be managed centrally (as in France), through the federal states (as in Germany), or through an independent but centralised system.

The administrative decentralisation of education is only a partial indicator for assessing the real level of independence of schools or the units that are formally responsible for them. In the USA, the role of school districts and their authorities varies greatly between states. In recent decades, the role of the federal government has grown, and nowadays it attempts to influence local and state education by increasing the role of federal funding with initiatives such as the Common Core (optional common core curriculum) and laws such as “No Child Left Behind” (which imposes standards of and accountability for student performance). In the US, however, school districts and state governments still play a key role.

In many respects, Poland has one of the most decentralised education systems. Schools are owned by local governments, which have a significant influence on the choice of headmasters and are responsible for allocating funds between schools. However, teachers’ salaries and employment rules are regulated centrally, and since these salaries constitute the vast majority of educational expenditure, in practice local government freedom is very limited.

The autonomy of educational institutions is a related aspect. In most countries, the core curriculum is defined centrally, and it specifies teaching content, requirements for students’ performance, and even the teaching methods to be used. Over the past 30 years, many countries have limited the scope of the topics in the core curriculum and instead have indicated the general requirements or learning outcomes to be achieved, whilst delegating partial responsibility for the curriculum to schools. This trend reinforces the autonomy of teachers and schools,

which is becoming the standard practice for most modern education systems. In the European Union, most countries leave it to schools to decide on the teaching methods, assessment, and textbooks (Eurydice, 2008).

Autonomy at the university level mainly concerns research, whereas educational decisions are often centrally regulated. Countries regulate university governance, funding, employment, faculties, curriculum, recruitment, and final qualifications in different ways. The dominant model at this level is similar to the model adopted in primary and secondary education: high autonomy in terms of teaching, with limited power to make decisions regarding remuneration or employment procedures. In comparison to primary and secondary education, higher education institutions have much greater freedom in defining and organising teaching content. Independent institutions, such as those that accredit and evaluate universities and their faculties, play a vital role in the higher education sector. In practice, the differences between the solutions that are adopted in individual countries, even in European countries, are very large (Estermann et al., 2011).

An important task within educational policy is to define a qualification system. Most countries have national examination systems that define the rules for awarding secondary school diplomas (the equivalent of the Polish school-leaving exams (*egzamin maturalny*) or vocational exams). These may be decentralised systems with assessment conducted at either local or school level, or standardised examination systems that are administered throughout the country. This roughly corresponds to the difference between the old and the new forms of school-leaving exams in Poland. Often the results of secondary school final exams form part of the recruitment criteria for universities, but in the USA, for example, recruitment is based on universities' own criteria, which are frequently based on tests organised by private entities (e.g. SAT exams). The requirements for exams leading to a university degree are usually determined by the universities. An interesting element introduced in some countries as a result of the introduction of the Qualifications Framework is being open to the recognition and validation of qualifications obtained by attending online training or courses. In Poland and several European and Anglo-Saxon countries, this has been legally introduced as part of states' educational policies, which has encouraged the recognition

of such qualifications. However, in practice, these are still marginal solutions.

Another key factor in educational policy is the structure of the system and, more specifically, the decisions that are made concerning, for example, the length of universal education and the same compulsory curriculum for all students; the age of beginning and ending compulsory education; the paths of general and vocational education; and the possibility of continuing education at a higher level. These decisions affect both the level of formal education of the population and the age at which they enter the labour market.

In most developed countries, compulsory schooling starts at the age of 6, but in many countries education starts earlier at the age of 3, 4, or 5. In Poland and Finland, school education starts relatively late at the age of 7, although most children attend one year of preparatory school education at the age of 6. In many countries, pre-school education starts at the age of 3, and in France, for example, this figure is almost 100% of the population. In Northern Ireland, compulsory schooling starts at the age of 4, while in the Netherlands it begins at the age of 5 and the curriculum is similar to that of pre-school in Poland; the difference lies mainly in the name given to it (school or pre-school) and in whether it is compulsory or not. In Poland, approximately 85% of four-year-old children attend kindergarten, while in the UK this figure is 100%; in most EU countries, almost all children of that age are in education. In the case of 3-year-old children, the difference is much greater. In Poland, about 2/3 of children attend kindergarten at that age, compared to about 90% on average in the EU as a whole (Eurostat data for 2017).

The key decision in educational policy is to determine the length of universal education within which students will follow the same core curriculum. Universal education covers children aged 6–7 to 10–11 years in all countries. In Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, and Hungary, after a period of primary education, pupils are streamed into different types of schools that are either oriented towards traditional subjects and academic disciplines or towards vocational preparation. Thanks to the reforms implemented in the 1960s and 1970s in the Nordic countries and the United Kingdom, the period of compulsory education in which all schools follow the same curriculum is longer. In Poland, after the introduction of junior high schools in 1999, this period was extended

from 8 to 9 years. International comparisons reveal that a longer period of general education and later streaming have a positive impact on the performance of weaker students and on the reduction of educational inequalities (Hanushek and Woessmann, 2006; Brunello and Checchi, 2007). For this reason, in recent years some German states have delayed the age at which schoolchildren are streamed and similar reforms are being considered in the Netherlands, where, to date, only changing the type of school attended during education has been allowed. Compulsory school-leaving age and the frequency of grade repetition are related issues. In Eastern European countries (including Poland), compulsory education lasts until the age of 18, and grade repetition is very rare. As a result, the vast majority of students finish their education at the secondary level. In Southern European countries, grade repetition is relatively common and – as compulsory education ends at the age of 15–16 years – this means that many weaker students finish their education at the primary level. In Portugal, this led to the problem of there being far more young people on the labour market during the recent economic crisis, which contributed to the decision to limit grade repetition and prolong compulsory schooling.

The number of students in comprehensive secondary education is usually linked to the availability of higher education. Educational policy shapes the supply of secondary school graduates, the supply of places available at university, and the supply of graduates to the labour market. In recent years, there has been a dynamic increase in the number of people studying at tertiary level, which corresponds to the social expectations and needs of the labour market, where the benefits of higher education remain high and those with a university degree have better opportunities than those without (Psacharopoulos and Patrinos, 2018). On the other hand, a significant increase in the number of people obtaining higher education is related to a mismatch between the competences acquired in education and the needs of the labour market (cf. Kocór, 2019). Besides, the term tertiary education covers differing educational paths. Countries such as the Netherlands, Germany, and Switzerland offer significantly broader tertiary vocational training opportunities, including short-cycle studies that last for two years (for example) and are tailored to the labour market. In Poland, the academic education system dominates, which means that the majority of students will attain

a master's, and vocational studies are not as popular. In this respect, educational policy may influence any or all of the following: the range of courses offered, the length of education, the moment of entering the labour market, the links between education and the needs of the labour market, and attitudes towards academic knowledge.

Teachers

Teachers are a key element of any education system. In developed countries, university graduates (not necessarily those with a master's degree) with the appropriate pedagogical qualifications are allowed to teach in primary and secondary schools. In some countries, the requirements for pre-school teachers and even for the first stage of primary school education are lower, and it is only necessary for teachers to hold a master's degree in secondary schools. Academic teachers tend to follow the scientific path, although in some countries there are separate paths for those focusing on teaching and those focusing on research.

A vital decision to be made in educational policy is whether to make access to the teaching profession open or closed (OECD, 2005). Historically, in many countries this has been a closed, lifelong choice, accessed through specific training and examinations similar in nature to the civil service. The teaching profession still enjoys this status in Germany and France. In other countries, it is possible to become a teacher through various paths, even at the age of 40 or 50. The decision to open up the teaching profession is linked to teacher education, entry requirements, career progression stages, remuneration, and requirements regarding teachers' employment. Closed systems are built around the necessity to pass difficult entrance exams in order to be admitted to university faculties that specifically train teachers (e.g. Finland), or specific exams must be passed before entering the teaching profession after graduation (e.g. Singapore). These systems usually have a specific career progression path, with the commensurate salary increases for teachers. In these countries, teaching is usually a lifelong profession, which guarantees the stability of the system at the expense of flexibility. Open systems cannot be based on a central qualification system, and the employment of teachers is often left to schools or local governments. The price that

is paid for flexibility and the openness of the profession includes a shortage of teaching staff, such as those willing to teach science, which is what happened during the economic boom (for example, in Great Britain in recent years and in big Polish cities after 2014).

In practice, each system is based on unique solutions that combine elements of opening up the system with a rigid model of professional advancement (as in Poland), which has been shaped both by historical conditions and differences in employment in the public sector. The teaching profession usually has specific legal regulations, which is because working hours and requirements for teachers are not easy to define. Most countries define compulsory as “in front of the blackboard” work time, which ranges from 18 to 25 hours per week across European countries. Apart from the hours spent in the classroom, approximately half of European countries also list other duties that teachers are obliged to fulfil, while the remaining countries (including Poland) do not define these duties precisely. Earnings, teaching hours, and class sizes are the three main factors that shape the costs of education and are among the most important organisational decisions in any education system.

Measuring educational outcomes and evaluating educational institutions

In most education systems, national examinations that validate the successive stages of schooling provide data that directly assesses learning outcomes and indirectly assesses the quality of teaching, for example, through the educational value-added method (Dolata, 2007). It is important that educational policy determines how content is assessed in examinations and whether examinations are to be standardised and reviewed externally, so that they can be used to assess learning outcomes throughout the system. This is not possible when standards and methods are left to individual educational institutions (schools, universities) or independent organisations. It is often the case that examinations do not meet the psychometric standards necessary to monitor learning outcomes over time or are organised at local levels (thus they differ across one country), which is why many countries have special

procedures to monitor the learning outcomes of random samples of students (e.g. NAEP in the USA, NAPLAN in Australia, or annual studies of random samples of students in Finland and Germany). Nowadays, international studies that assess learning outcomes increasingly play this role (see below).

The assessment of learning outcomes is a continuous requirement of any education system, as is the evaluation of educational institutions. However, in most countries the latter focuses on administrative and procedural issues rather than on the quality of education. This quality is difficult to evaluate objectively and, depending on the country, is based on observing lessons, analysing documentation, or evaluating student performance. Regional educational inspectorates (called *kuratorium* in Poland) can have a significant impact on how a school functions, and they even have the right to order staff changes or close an institution down. In the UK, the independent regulatory body, Ofsted, has a very strong influence on the functioning of schools. In some countries, schools are self-evaluating (e.g. in Finland), and any control exerted by external bodies is ad hoc.

In higher education, standardised examinations for students are less common, mainly due to variations in the programmes that are taught, which are a result of the autonomous nature of universities. For this reason, universities are generally evaluated through an accreditation system, which allows experts to assess commonly agreed or ministry-imposed teaching standards and are often focused on research activities. In recent years, the monitoring of data that tracks graduates' functioning on the labour market has been gaining in popularity; in Poland, this data has been monitored for the last few years as a result of the ELA system (the National System for Monitoring the Economic Situation of Graduates).

An important issue in teaching is the recognition of skills that are difficult to measure through standardised tests and other forms of assessment. The aim of each education system is to build an appropriate system of values and broadly defined 'upbringing'. Today, the importance of soft skills that are related, for example, to cooperation, but also to the development of appropriate attitudes, is also emphasised. This dimension of education is difficult to quantify and assess but is equally important and requires adequate support through educational policy.

The education system should be a skilful balance between requirements that can be objectively assessed through tests and exams, and requirements that cannot be objectively assessed through any form of standardised testing or measurement: both should be implemented on a daily basis at schools and universities. In the latter case, it is vital to emphasise the importance of shaping appropriate values, attitudes, and cooperation skills during the teaching process as well as in teacher training. Educational policy should create a system that, on the one hand, requires measurable effects that are related to the assessment of knowledge and skills; on the other hand, it should balance the requirements and incentives for schools that are necessary in order to develop positive values and attitudes. Those elements of teaching that cannot be assessed by tests and exams must find their appropriate place in the core curricula, in the system of evaluation of entire educational units, in the curricula of teacher training, and in other instruments of educational policy that focus on the process rather than on educational outcomes.

Evaluation of the system and the role of international organisations

Although there are a few countries in which ministries or specially established institutions perform evaluation of their entire education system on a regular basis, this is not a common occurrence. In fact, before the 1990s no data was available that would enable reliable comparisons of the learning outcomes between countries. In this respect, any comparison between countries was mainly in terms of the number of people completing particular stages of education or government spending on education. These indicators obviously do not reflect the quality of the education provided and offer limited grounds for comparison, since at present most developed countries guarantee universal access to secondary education and widespread access to tertiary education.

The first plans for an international study to compare student performance were made in the 1960s. Only 12 countries participated in the First International Maths Study (FIMS), organised by the IEA. The methodology of the study left much to be desired, and curricula differences were cited as a factor used to undermine comparisons between

countries. It was not until the 1990s that the first large-scale comparative studies in this area were conducted. The IALS project was the first study of adult competences. This study involved many OECD countries and the results were representative of more than 10% of the world's population. The TIMSS study, which was organised by the IEA in 1995 and is repeated every four years, provides the basis for comparing student performance in the mathematical and natural sciences. This is based on representative student samples and standardised tests that are conducted in several dozen countries worldwide. The PISA study, which was organised for the first time in 2000, is the first study in which all OECD countries participated from the beginning. It is currently the largest study of its kind, with about 60–80 countries participating in it every three years, and it covers all developed countries.

By providing a reference point for comparing educational outcomes between countries, the results of international studies of student performance have revolutionised educational policy theory. In Germany, the TIMSS and PISA studies initiated a public debate on the quality of teaching. Germans ignored their first poor results in the first TIMSS study of 1995, arguing that it measured themes that are not included in the core curriculum. Further underperformance in the PISA study of 2000 caused the 'PISA shock', which was the persuasive factor for the moderate reforms that have been introduced in the German states over the past two decades (reforms that include streaming and greater support being offered to immigrant students). The PISA studies 'discovered' the education systems of countries such as Finland and Singapore, which had not previously been of general interest. As they consistently perform best in various international studies, their education systems and the specific solutions that have been implemented by them became the focus of numerous analyses. These analyses led many countries (with less developed education systems and of different historical and social contexts) to copy their solutions. Obviously, this raises questions about the sensibility of such a way of building educational policy and utilising the results of international studies (Volante, 2018).

International studies that assess student and adult knowledge and skills reveal that the differences between education systems remain relatively stable over time and do not really change, regardless of how tests are constructed, what their exact content is, and who administers

them (Brown et al., 2007). One of the revelations of the PISA study is that the countries that consistently achieve the best results are often also those that experience little variation in their results over time. However, the explicit link between these results and the quality of teaching or the way in which these systems are organised is questionable. We do not know the extent to which culture (society's appreciation of education) and family (investing in education and supporting children) influence student performance, and to what extent it is the school itself and the quality of the teaching. The relationships between performance and cultural, social, material, and educational resources are very complex and vary across countries (Borgonovi, Pokropek, and Jakubowski, 2015).

In many countries, the current level of educational outcomes may be the result of past educational policies rather than current solutions. A good example is Finland, which in the 1970s created an educational system using a significantly different plan to other countries at the time (Oates, 2015). Other countries' total disregard for the results of international studies and lessons learned from the best-performing countries can only be explained by their reluctance to introduce reforms. It is generally acknowledged that the best-performing countries combine educational policy solutions that are transferrable and can be adapted to fit their needs (Schleicher, 2019).

Reforms and research-based educational policy

Educational policy is not only influenced by the increasing availability of international studies that compare learning outcomes and the factors that have influenced them (Hanushek and Woessmann, 2011), but also by the increasing amount of reliable educational research that is available as a result. Over the last two decades, hundreds of experimental and quasi-experimental studies have been conducted. These studies provide an opportunity to assess the practices that are applied in various schools and systemic solutions. Several countries have established knowledge-broker institutions, which support experimental research, conduct meta-analyses, and prepare systematic reviews. By 2013, only two experimental studies had been conducted in the UK, whereas today, mainly thanks to the work of the Education Endowment Foundation,

there are over a hundred studies. Similar institutions, although operating on a smaller scale, have been established in the USA, Scandinavian countries, and the Netherlands, with more countries currently in the process of introducing them. Their work is supported by international organisations such as the World Bank, UNESCO, and OECD.

Teaching is a complex social process, therefore it is impossible to identify solutions that will work successfully in each scenario. The education system is based on culture, values, and social relations, not to mention the political situation, all of which create a unique context for reform in each individual country. In most countries, teachers are the largest professional group and have a key influence on the implementation of reforms, which means that educational change requires very broad consultation and consensus seeking. The numerous examples of unsuccessful reforms from around the world that were based on research or successful solutions from other countries demonstrate how difficult it is to reform education.

While appreciating the uniqueness of education systems and the importance of context in educational reform, including changes in teaching practices, it should be emphasised that our understanding of what successfully works in education is growing. This knowledge is provided not only by the experimental research that is conducted in classes and the quasi-experimental assessment of systemic changes, but also by research conducted by cognitive psychologists and brain researchers. These studies have led to the rejection of views that, although widespread in education, have no basis in research (Holmes, 2019). It is apparent that the use of research to create educational policy and to change teaching practices will grow in the coming years.

Educational policy in Poland

Educational policy in Poland is shaped primarily by two ministries: the Ministry of National Education, which is responsible for education covering the pre-school, primary, and secondary level, and the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, which is responsible for higher education. Formally, no ministry is responsible for adult education and lifelong learning; here responsibility depends on who provides the services

and who finances them. For example, supplementary or adult education that results in taking the secondary level school-leaving exam is the responsibility of the Ministry of National Education; adult education courses are provided by universities, and training for the unemployed is supervised by job centres, which are dependent on the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy and local governments. The participation of social partners in shaping educational policy is very limited. The ministries establish boards and consultative bodies, and the relevant acts undergo the usual consultation processes, which are only of advisory importance despite the fact that in the case of educational acts they involve a significant number of organisations. The various government educational agencies (such as the Central Examination Commission or the Centre for Education Development) are either directly or indirectly subordinate to the Ministry of Education, which appoints their heads; the same applies to the agencies that are subordinate to the Ministry of Science and Higher Education. This situation aligns Poland with those countries that have a centralised management system, but it distances Poland from countries that have decentralised their educational policy decision-making process, e.g. Finland or the Anglo-Saxon countries (Jakubowski, Gajderowicz, and Wiśniewski, 2019). In higher education, partially independent institutions (including the Polish Accreditation Commission) have been established which represent the broad interests of universities and act autonomously, even though they are regulated by the ministry. The adult education market is also autonomous in nature, but in recent years it has been influenced by the resources on offer from European funds, with criteria imposed by the ministries distributing these resources.

In terms of school financing, the education system in Poland is one of the most decentralised. Formally, local governments finance education and make decisions concerning the school network or the appointment of headmasters. In practice, these decisions are limited by central regulations, and education is mostly financed by an education subsidy; the freedom to spend this subsidy is greatly limited by central regulations that define teachers' employment conditions and remuneration. Universities have considerable autonomy in their management of resources and organisation of work, but again they are financed by centrally regulated funds, and employment and remuneration are determined by

the Ministry. In the Polish education system, schools have a great deal of freedom in selecting teaching methods, but the content of teaching is defined by the core curriculum. The current version of the core curriculum, which was introduced in 2015, significantly limits the autonomy of schools, and learning outcomes are assessed by central external examinations. Universities enjoy considerable autonomy in this respect, and in principle they decide on teaching content and its evaluation autonomously.

Poland is also known for its support for private education, which is largely financed using state funds. Public funding is provided for all schoolchildren from kindergarten to secondary school. Students of non-state higher education institutions can also benefit from public funds. For example, they can apply for state financial aid, although non-state higher education institutions themselves do not receive education subsidies from the state. However, the private education sector is subject to quite strong regulations, e.g. private schools have to follow the same core curriculum and requirements that are applicable to state schools. The key difference here is that the teaching profession is deregulated, and employment rules come from the Labour Code and not from the Teacher's Charter. The number of students in private schools in Poland is steadily increasing, although it is still significantly lower than the average in European countries. According to Eurostat data, the percentage of students attending private primary schools in Poland increased from 4.2% in 2013 to 6.1% in 2017, which can be compared with the EU average of 14.1% in 2017 (this indicator covers all entities run by private organisations, including independent schools)³. In the case of universities, a similar percentage of students attend private universities: in Poland this is about 25%; in the EU it is about 27% on average⁴.

In 1999, Poland implemented reforms that extended the period of universal education from 8 to 9 years, thus strengthening the development of general competences of all students. This was reinforced by later reforms that introduced compulsory education at the age of 5 and guaranteed a place in pre-school education for children aged 3 and 4. This extension of general education increased the performance of the

³ Eurostat, educ_uae_enrp04 indicator (accessed 14.10.2019).

⁴ Eurostat, educ_uae_enrt01 indicator, data for 2016 (accessed 14.10.2019).

weakest students in Poland (Jakubowski et al., 2016) and improved their situation on the labour market (Drucker and Horn, 2016). Reversing these reforms through the liquidation of junior high schools and the abolition of compulsory education at the age of 5 has shortened the period of compulsory general education. However, it is a fact that in Poland this is still longer than in Germany or Hungary, for example.

Poland is distinguished by high formal qualification requirements for teachers, and almost all (including pre-school education teachers) have a master's degree. On the other hand, university admission requirements for teacher training are lower than those of faculties offering other courses (Burski et al., 2013). Entry into the profession is open and does not require passing any special or selective exams. The system of professional advancement encourages teachers to improve their qualifications and document their work, but it is not selective. Almost 100% of teachers pass their professional examinations, and currently more than half of the teaching staff in Poland have attained the highest degree of a certified teacher.

The Polish core curriculum has undergone three significant changes related to changes in the curricula, textbooks, and other educational materials, as well as in the assessment of learning outcomes. The 1999 reform introduced a new basis for the core curriculum which allowed teachers to follow one of several curricula and to select from among several textbooks, or even to create proprietary curricula. The reform also introduced a system of standardised external exams for the completion of each stage of education. The first of these exams took place in 2002. In terms of the selection of teaching methods and content, the independence of the school and the teacher was increased as a result of these reforms. However, a system of evaluating schools by means of examinations and measurement of teaching outcomes was introduced. Another important reform of the core curriculum that was introduced in 2007–2008 strengthened the autonomy of schools and teachers, giving them greater freedom in organising the content of teaching and the selection of educational materials. In a way, the changes introduced with the liquidation of junior high schools after 2015 were a retrograde step that reduced the number of examinations (by eliminating the junior high school examination) and increased the emphasis on covering the content described in the core curriculum. At the same time, the division

of the natural sciences into its separate subjects at the second stage of primary school education was re-introduced.

Opinions regarding the quality of teaching in Polish schools are very diverse and are largely based on personal experience or subjective evaluation of curricula and learning outcomes. External examinations in Poland do not provide a useful tool for comparing learning outcomes over time, as they are not based on comparable standards and are not constructed in a way that enables comparison. Moreover, there is no institution in place that can conduct a comprehensive assessment of the education system. In this situation, international studies seem to be the only appropriate tool to assess the quality of teaching in Polish schools. The most important among these is the PISA study conducted by the OECD. This is the largest study of its kind in the world and the only study that Poland has participated in for several years. In 2000, the study concentrated on 15-year-old secondary school students, and the results placed our country far below the average for OECD countries. Approximately 80% of vocational school students achieved results in the reading comprehension section that were below the basic threshold of understanding simple texts. Following this, Poland significantly improved this dramatically low score and at one point was the only OECD country to obtain a score above the OECD average. In recent years, Polish students have confirmed their high scores in primary school studies (PIRLS and TIMSS) and in the PIAAC Survey of Adult Skills, in which the youngest generations scored above the OECD average. When comparing the learning outcomes of Polish students with those of other countries, Poles are close to or above the average for OECD countries and the European Union (Jakubowski et al., 2017).

Polish higher education was reformed with a view to increasing the autonomy of universities, which can determine both what they teach and the standard of assessment of learning outcomes that they apply today. Universities are evaluated on the basis of an accreditation system for which the Polish Accreditation Committee is responsible. There are no studies that have compared learning outcomes at the level of higher education. In recent years, the ELA system (the National System for Monitoring the Economic Situation of Graduates) was introduced, which monitors the financial situation of graduates on the labour market, based on data obtained from universities and ZUS (the Social Insurance

Institution). The only study comparing learning outcomes in higher education is the international adult survey PIAAC, which was implemented in Poland in 2011–2012 and covered a large sample of young people, including university students. The study revealed significant differences in the level of students' competences, with relatively smaller variances in the competences of people under 30 than occurs in other countries (Burski et al., 2013). This was a cross-sectional study, not a longitudinal one; its results suggest that, unlike other countries, the key competences are not developed during university studies in Poland. However, this conclusion does not apply to all fields of study as comparisons of, for example, engineering students suggest that during the time they spend at university their key competences are well developed.

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