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**Comparative International Education: Institutions of Higher Education
in Poland and Canadian Universities: A Comparison Using an
Information Technology Conceptual Framework**

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to compare institutions of higher learning in Poland and universities in Canada using an information technology conceptual framework consisting of three parts: participation, feedback and partnership.

Introduction

The primary focus of this article is to compare institutions of higher education in Poland and Canadian universities. Educators at all levels are being challenged to come up with new ideas and adaptations to learning theory. Comparative education provides a vehicle for exploring changes in education for new and emerging democracies. This article will focus on Canadian and Polish post-secondary education using an information technology theoretical framework consisting of three parts: participation, feedback and partnership. It is advisable to do so now because of the new challenges that Polish institutions of higher learning are now facing in terms of enrolment, quality control and partnerships, which are the result of Poland's recent (April, 2004) entry into the European Union (EU).

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to compare institutions of higher education in Poland and Canadian universities. This article examines Canadian and Polish post-secondary education using an information technology theoretical framework using participation, feedback, and partnership.

Education in Poland and Canadian Universities

Poles have been interested in higher learning activities for many years. The Jagiellonian University (1364), where Copernicus once studied, is their oldest university. In comparison, Canada's first university (Laval University) was founded in 1663, about 300 years later (Liwicka, 1959, p. 10; Seldenthuis, 1996, p. 84).

Polish higher schooling is carried out in various kinds of institutions such as universities, academies, technical universities and higher pedagogical schools whereas in Canada such education takes place in one type of learning environment – universities. Moreover, as one would expect, both Polish and Canadian institutions award professional and non-professional degrees.

Unlike Poland, Canada does not have a national system of higher education – each province and territory has its own system of schooling. One advantage of having separate school plans in a country as large as Canada is that regional needs are more likely to be addressed. Conversely, a single system of schooling might strengthen Canadian identity.

Higher education is free for Polish daytime students^{1,2} attending public institutions. On the other hand, Canadians must pay for their university studies thus limiting enrollment. During the academic year 1995-1996, “the average tuition at Canadian universities” was \$2,500, Seldenthuis, 1996, viii). Fortunately, a government loan program exists in each country for students who are in need of financial assistance which means that both the Polish and Canadian government are responding to the educational needs of their poorer citizens.

Entrance exams are used by both Polish higher institutions and Canadian universities. Poles administer examinations to those who wish to begin studying towards a first degree whereas Canadians use a norm based test (the Graduate Record Examination), when selecting students for advanced degrees. (The first degree at a Polish higher school is the licentiate which takes three years to complete, or the magister, which takes four or five years. In comparison, an initial degree (e.g., a BA) at a Canadian university is awarded after three or four years of full-time study.

Theoretical Framework

Since the 1980s (Byron and Glagiardi) massive changes have occurred in the area of information technology (for example, the development of the Internet and (CD-ROMS) which have resulted in more knowledge being available. This growth has brought about a new form of human relationships in terms of participation, feedback and partnership. That being the case it is reasonable to compare institutions of higher education in Poland and Canadian universities in terms of the manner in which they adopt this new form because “Education is not only a preparation for life; it is a development in life” (King, 1979, p. 12).

Administrative and Supervisory Structure and Operation of Both the Polish and Canadian Systems of Higher Education

There is broader government involvement in higher education in Poland than there is in Canada. In Canada only provincial ministries of education play an active role in the educational process whereas in Poland other ministries besides education (e.g. agriculture and transport) are also concerned.

Most institutions of higher education in Poland are regulated by the 1990 Bill on Schools of Higher Education (Ustawa o Szkolnictwie Wyższym) which is based on an 1989 report (Stachowski, 1989, Chapter X). The Minister of National Education and Sport is responsible for enforcing and establishing the particular framework for it (Article 31[1])^{3,4,5}. However, the Minister must take into account the views of the Central Council of Higher Education [Rada Główna Szkolnictwa Wyższego] (Article 35 [2]) which is a freely elected organ consisting of representatives of the academic community (Article 36 [3]).

The 1990 Bill gives full autonomy to some state institutions of higher learning and limited autonomy to others^{6,7}. Institutions with full autonomy can initiate and terminate departments, decide on their own internal laws and determine their admission criteria; schools that do not have full autonomy must receive the approbation of the responsible government minister for these judgements (Articles 48 [2], 12 [1] and 141 [1&3] respectively). In order for a school to have greater autonomy it has to engage 60 professors and half of its faculties must have the right to grant the degree of doctor habilitated (Article 12 [1])⁸. These are not good reasons for determining autonomy. This division of autonomy favors larger institutions over smaller ones. Consequently, academic

staff and students might want to be associated with the former instead of the latter. On the other hand, once a public Canadian university is given permission to grant degrees and deliver academic programs by the responsible provincial authority it has the right to design curricula, determine entry requirements and establish program demands (Dennison, 1995, p. 236).

Furthermore, the 1990 Bill allows for the creation of non-state schools of higher education (Article 15 (1)). As a result more people have access to post-secondary schooling^{9,10}. Prior to this act the only private university operating in Poland was the Catholic University of Lublin (Kozakiewicz, 1992, p. 95). A number of non-public schools evolved from management training centres which were established between 1989 and 1990 (Białecki, 1996, p. 171). In 1991, the first additional non-state higher school was started, and now there are 136 of these institutions (Białecki, 1996, 171; Ministry of National Education, 2000, p.37). In 1996, the largest number of private institutions of higher learning (12) was situated in the Warsaw area, nevertheless, a few were located in places that had never had a post-secondary institution thus enhancing the cultural aspect of these communities (Białecki, 1996, p. 171). Moreover, only 12 non-state higher institutions offer degrees at the magister (MA) level. Over 413,781 students attended such schools in 1999 which suggests that public educational institutions might not be meeting the needs of Polish society (Auleytner, 2000, pages 1-1.3; Ministry of National Education, 2000, p. 37; Przyborowska, 1997, summary).

Private higher schools in Poland are believed by some people to have lower admission requirements, higher graduation rates, lower student to teacher ratios, better facilities and less credibility with employers than their state counterparts¹¹. Moreover, one reason that has been put forth for deciding on a non-state institution of higher learning is “equal partnership between staff and students” (Białecki, 1996, pages 172-173). In addition, as one might expect, the distinguishing feature separating students who attend non-state schools instead of state ones is their financial standing (Białecki, 1996, p. 173). About 50 to 60 percent of non-public institution students have at least one parent who is involved in the ownership of a business. An additional 15 percent of parents are employed by private companies (Białecki, 1996, p. 173). These statistics suggests that wealth is a factor when considering a private higher school in Poland.

If there is continued growth in the number of students enrolling in private higher schools then public expenditures that would be required to educate these people could be aimed at underfunded state-institutions¹². In fact, it might be to the Polish government’s advantage to support financially non-public higher institutions. (Interestingly, the Bill allows for this, Article 23 [1]). However, if this were to occur, private higher schools might be subject to more government controls than they are now.

The leadership of Polish higher schools and Canadian universities also differs. Polish higher institutions are directed by rectors and Canadian universities are headed by presidents. However, the decision- making powers of these administrators are limited by internal governing bodies such as senates (Canada and Poland) and boards of governors (Canada) (Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials). It should be noted that none of the Polish managing boards include people from outside the school (as is the case at the University of Toronto) thus excluding society’s direct involvement in higher education management (University of Toronto [1997-98], p. 509). This point was mentioned in a Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development Report (OECD, 1996, p. 104).

In accordance with the 1990 Bill, deans as well as their assistants (vice-deans) are elected for no longer than a three- year period with the resolution that they do not serve in thei

respective posts for more than 2 terms thus allowing others to serve (Article 63 [1&4])¹³. In comparison, Canadian university deans are selected through competition which means that appointments are based on the decisions of a few as opposed to many people.

Article (33 (1)) of the 1990 Bill allows for higher schools to form partnerships (including foreign ones) and to hold accounts in banks outside Poland for this purpose (Article 26). Moreover, the Bill (Article 33 (1)) specifies that the Ministry of National Education and Sport is to facilitate such arrangements by co-ordinating the collaboration of institutions with outside educational facilities. There are benefits to such agreements: 1) academic workers become more qualified and prosperous, 2) institutional and program credibility are established, 3) students become more knowledgeable and 4) schools enhance their reputations. Arrangements which can include student and staff exchanges, occur: 1) “naturally and freely”, 2) as a result of bilateral co-operation between governments and 3) within the framework of international bodies (multilateral cooperation) (Ministry of National Education, 2000, 40-41).

European Community Tempus program funds are obtainable for facilitating academic partnerships between Polish and European Union organizations (Kallen, 1993, 25). The Tempus program began on May 7, 1990 to help countries (like Poland) who were thought to be ready for entry into the European Union develop their higher education programs within the fabric of a market economy and a democratic society (Kallen, 1993, p. 25). Information is available to justify Poland’s fear of an increased brain drain westward in such arrangements due to the low salaries paid to Polish academic workers (Kallen, 1993, p.26)

As a matter of fact, foreign partnerships are important to Canadian universities – “1,800 international exchange agreements” (e.g., faculty and student exchanges) have taken place as of 1996 (Seldenthuis, 1996-1997, X).

Concluding Remarks

Based on Article 38[1] of the Bill the State Accreditation Committee was created on January 1, 2002 (<http://www.menis.gov.pl/pka/>). Consequently, better equivalence of degree arrangements can now be made with EU countries because there is an assurance of higher quality education. Earlier arrangements appear to be based on “comparable study organization procedures and student exchange programs” (Edmondson, 1998, p. 90).

No national quality assurance system exists covering Canadian universities that means quality education is not assured in post-secondary institutions in Canada.

NOTES

1. The student population of Poland's higher institution students is divided. Daytime learners do not have to pay for their studies whereas non-daytime ones do. This division impedes the learning process. One way of resolving this problem would be to demand tuition payments from daytime students as well. Consequently, state schools would be on an equal footing with non-state ones as to tuition fees. That might make them less attractive to prospective students than they are now. However, such a measure would not only be contrary to Poland's constitution but also quite possibly might restrict access to higher education (Edmondson, 1998, p. 88).
2. Also, it has been noted that most non-daytime students have not succeeded in passing the entrance exams to full-time day studies and that the student- to- academic staff ratio is significantly greater for non-daytime students than it is for daytime ones (Edmondson, 1998, p. 54).
3. The 1990 Bill does not include state institutions whose status are spelled out by the act on Higher Military Education (Article 1 [1]) nor does it cover "schools of higher education and theological seminaries" owned by churches and other religious organizations unless there are agreements to the contrary except for the Catholic University of Lublin (Article 1 (3)). Also, it must be noted that there is separate legislation regulating the following academic degrees and title: doctor, doctor habilitated and professor.
4. As a matter of interest, many other former soviet-bloc countries have also introduced legislation pertaining to higher education since 1990 suggesting that existing laws were not compatible with the new economic and political realities: Albania (1994), Estonia (1992), Hungary (1993), Latvia (1995), Romania (1993) and Slovenia (1993), (Phare, 1998).
5. Provisions are made in the Bill for students to form self-governing bodies in each school (Article 156 [1]) and for representatives of such organs to be consulted about the drafting of laws pertaining to students in higher education (Article 157 [3]). Furthermore, student organisations are permitted (Article 158 [1]).
6. The only exception to this is "the state art School of higher education" (Article 12[2]).
7. Poland is not the only nation to restrict the boundaries of autonomy in its legal documents pertaining to higher education. Estonia and the Czech and Slovak republics have also done so (Phare, 1998).
8. In 1993, only 15% of government – run schools had the number of professors needed for full autonomy (Directory of Polish Universities and Other Higher Education Institutions) (OECD, 1996, 105).
9. The fact that foreigners (as well as Poles) can establish non-state schools (Article 15 [1]) may cause some concern.
10. Private universities also exist in Canada (Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials).
11. Class discussions, 9 and 11 May 2001, the University of Science and Technology in Cracow.
12. The same point has been made with reference to the increasing popularity of private schools in China (Cheng and De Lany, 1999).
13. Prior to the passage of the Bill, deans were chosen, however, it was common knowledge within the higher education community that quite often "political criteria" was a crucial factor in the election process.

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15. See **NATIONAL FORUM JOURNALS**: www.nationalforum.com.

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