

Abstract

A decade of reforms has changed almost every aspect of university functioning. Poland has moved from privatization to deprivatization and from deinstitutionalization to reinstitutionalization of the research mission of its universities. The research internationalization agenda has led to introducing quantitative, research-focused indicators and new funding and assessment systems. However, the system of incentives to internationalize Polish research has so far proved to be ineffective. These reforms were pursued in politically turbulent times.

Poland: A Decade of Reforms (2010–2020)

Marek Kwiek

During the first two decades following 1989, Polish universities remained largely unreformed. Core features of the system during that period—such as noncompetitive research funding modes, strongly collegial and ineffective governance, and a complicated multilevel system of academic degrees and positions—remained virtually untouched until the early 2010s.

Research was underfunded, and the research mission undervalued. System expansion and teaching-related privatization (serving huge numbers of fee-paying part-time students) were the main policy directions. However, starting in the mid-2000s, the long-term implications of declining demographics became clear to policy makers and institutional leaders. Indeed, while in 2006, there were about 2 million students, by 2020, their number had fallen to 1.2 million. Consequently, by the late 2000s, research became a new national policy focus.

A Decade of Reforms

The 2010s were a decade of reforms that changed almost every aspect of university functioning. Research was reinstitutionalized as a main university mission and a new grant-based research-funding system was introduced. Poland moved from privatization to deprivatization and from deinstitutionalization to reinstitutionalization of the research mission in its universities.

With research back as a national policy focus, research grants became competitively distributed by a new national research council (the NCN, established in 2010). Public subsidies for research became linked to faculty performance and national assessment. Internationalization of research became a keyword in all major policy documents of the decade.

New funding and assessment mechanisms fueled vertical stratification in the system and the gradual emergence of two types of institutions: those that were strongly research oriented, and those with limited research output and funding. Additionally, the new Excellence Initiative—Research Universities (the IDUB national program for

2020–2026) started in 2020, with the aim to provide additional funding to 10 large universities selected on a competitive basis. IDUB's total funding is about USD 1 billion for seven years, and its spending is discretionary, based on special institutional development plans and linked to revised institutional strategies.

However, the system of incentives to internationalize Polish research has so far proved to be ineffective. The new, highly competitive way of distributing research funds did not result in positive changes in the structure of Polish scientific output, as had been expected. The share of output published as a result of international collaboration has been one of the lowest in Europe, even though the number of internationally indexed publications has grown substantially. Poland was not able to make full use of European Union research funds, especially those from the European Research Council. Low expenditures on academic research have contributed to the failure of internationalization policies: A radical change in the management of research funds (the new grant system) was not accompanied by a radical change in the level of financing of academic science. In addition, the system of academic promotion and the principles of research assessment exercises (termed “parameterization”) in 2014 and 2017 did not promote research internationalization strongly enough.

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First Wave of Reforms

There were two waves of reforms in the 2010s. The first wave was carried out between 2009 and 2011 by minister Barbara Kudrycka (the Kudrycka reforms) and the second between 2016 and 2018 by minister Jarosław Gowin (the Gowin reforms). Within the framework of the Kudrycka reforms, the Polish system was reconfigured on the basis of multilevel governance, with new intermediary coordinating institutions situated between higher education institutions and the state, the NCN being a good example. Financing of academic research became more directly linked to the assessment of measurable research productivity, targeting about 1,000 basic academic units, mostly faculties.

Prior to the Kudrycka reforms, the state was directly involved in coordinating higher education. In the new governance architecture, higher formal autonomy of institutions and academics became combined with higher levels of accountability. The new intermediary agencies are, in principle, independent of the state in that they are either directly managed by academics elected by the academic community at large, or indirectly influenced by academics through governing boards. The state continues to define global levels of public funding, priority areas of national research, and the primary division of funds between main funding agencies. However, decisions on how to allocate research funds are taken by academics within these agencies.

Second Wave of Reforms

The fundamental ideas behind the Gowin reforms (carried out in 2016–2018, but with delayed implementation until 2022) were meant to differentiate the higher education system further and internationalize Polish academic knowledge production. The two main concepts discussed were *system differentiation* (teaching-oriented versus research-oriented institutions) and *research internationalization* (national versus international research).

While teaching was important in the Gowin reforms, the main focus was on the differentiation of the system along teaching and research lines, and on the internationalization of research. The main recent changes to the higher education system focused on research: new institutional structures in universities, formed along a newly defined list of research disciplines; a new research evaluation system (expected to start in 2022); a selection of 10 research-intensive universities receiving additional funding in the framework of the IDUB Excellence program; and new doctoral schools established in universities with a visible research output, rather than scattering doctoral education across the whole system. Another important change was the strengthening of rectors and their management teams—at the expense of traditional representative bodies such as the senate and faculty councils.

This research internationalization agenda meant introducing heavily quantitative, research-focused indicators to the funding and assessment systems: What was expected was more international collaboration, more internationally visible (through global

datasets) research, and more internationally coauthored publications, at the individual, institutional, and national levels.

Universities and Big Politics

In the 2010s, universities were not politicized and were kept protected from big national political shifts throughout the two waves of reforms. In particular, the change of power in 2015 from centrist to rightist political parties did not lead to any change of higher education policies. University reforms and universities themselves have been spared the devastating political clashes, with strong populist overtones, of the past few years. No politically motivated changes were introduced; however, in the past few months, the theme of “renationalization” of higher education, especially in the social sciences and humanities, as opposed to its ongoing “internationalization,” has been discussed in political circles. It is hard to predict to what extent national politics may change the general higher education policy directions of internationalization of research, vertical stratification in the system, and competitive funding modes in the future. However, looking at the experience from the periods from 2009 to 2015 (centrist governments) and from 2015 to 2020 (rightist governments), prospects to continue reforms at the systemic level seem relatively good, despite some turbulence on the surface. Hopefully, the reforms will be strengthened and consolidated rather than stopped or reversed, and universities will not be pushed in new, possibly populist, directions. ▲

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