

*Students with Disabilities in the Polish Educational System  
After the Political Changes (2007 - 2012)*

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*"Society can only step up the pace as a whole, if each individual will be able to develop their abilities and talents optimally, if each individual will have the knowledge and skills, values and criteria of judgment which enable them to achieve the optimum of abilities in every life situation"*

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***Introduction***

In the period of the People's Republic of Poland, there were almost no students with disabilities at universities. The legislative, organisational, social and educational conditions at universities and students' dormitories made it impossible for people with disabilities to start higher education.

In the period of serious socio-political, economic, and educational crisis which took place in Poland in the eighties, students and lecturers, as well as the whole society, fought for broadly defined freedom, and also the access to education in open-access institutions, without restrictions in the field of social background or state of health. The actions of a student organisation, the Independent Students' Association (Niezależne Zrzeszenie Studentów - NZS), were of great importance during the implementation of these changes. The organisation was founded in 1980 and it was an expression of a protest of student community against policies of the People's Republic of Poland. NZS worked mainly in the field of politics and propaganda, organised demonstrations and strikes – it was opposed to the communist government, the lack of democracy, injustice and the lack of freedom of speech. The program of NZS aimed at changing communist political system, education and economic system.

After the year 1989, the Independent Students' Association begun the next phase of its activity and the profile of the organisation was changed. The aim was to fight for the interests of students and the development of cultural and entertaining activity, as well as social and educational conditions for students with serious problems resulting from their state of health.

***Students with disabilities at Polish universities***

Even in the eighties of the last century, at all Polish universities it was unusual to see a student moving in a wheelchair or with a white cane. Today, it can be considered a great success that universities have simply begun to fulfil the obligation imposed on them by the Polish Constitution of 1997. It is not easy, however, to make up for many years of backlog, and what is more to eliminate permanently the practice of treating people with disabilities as if they were absent in the society. The period of the People's Republic of Poland was the time when segregation and isolation - both in the field of education and employment - were elements of state policy, which resulted in the lack of interest in creating conditions for people with disabilities enabling them to participate in social life, and that, in turn, led to the overall maladjustment of the external environment and infrastructure (architecture, transportation, etc.) to the needs of this social group. It was also time of creation and dissemination of stereotypes and prejudices associated with disability and people with disabilities.

Unfortunately, the academic environment wasn't also free from this influence. Even today, many of us think about people with disabilities mostly as people in need of help, incapable of independent life, who are not able to meet all requirements. This concept is often associated with a certain fear of direct contact with them, but also compassion and overprotection.

It should be kept in mind that people with disabilities want to decide and make choices for themselves, as well as use the rights to which everyone is entitled – when it comes to universities, each student has the right

to make decisions ranging from the choice of studies to the forms of taking exams. They differ in abilities, ambitions and temper the same way as the able-bodied people. We should try to think about people with disabilities in terms of their capabilities, and not limitations. In addition to good will, however, we need to possess specific knowledge, which will allow the society to treat students with disabilities and patients with chronic illnesses in an appropriate manner, providing them with the necessary adaptations, so that later on they can be expected to have the same knowledge as the able-bodied students. It should be remembered that the knowledge and skills they acquire in the course of study, may influence the success or failure in starting their professional work and the pursuit of other goals in life.

While recognising the equal right of students with disabilities to fully participate in life of the academic community, universities take various measures to remove barriers which make the participation difficult.

Scientific and technical progress, changes of globalisation, as well as democratisation of social and educational life in Poland after 1989, have introduced many changes in the functioning of people with disabilities. Numerous legislative documents have secured the same rights to education for people with disabilities as for the able-bodied people (Constitution of the Republic of Poland, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Act on Higher Education and other laws).

In connection with the global "Education for All" program, there are implemented various forms of integrated and inclusive education for people with special educational needs, including students with disabilities.

In Poland, within the framework of the "University for All" program, universities pursue an open-door policy in relation to people with disabilities. They become friendly to students with various types of disabilities.

The implemented changes do not only relate to overcoming architectural barriers, but also to stereotypes. In university buildings, there appeared ramps, elevators, modernised sanitary units, induction loops for people with hearing loss, computer labs for people who are blind or visually impaired, and multimedia rooms, where classes are held for people with hearing and visual impairment. Students' dormitory buildings are also modernised.

Universities organise offices in their structures, where university candidates or students with disabilities can seek advice, information and assistance regarding specific support (adjustment) during entrance exams to universities as well as during the course of study. Some universities also appoint, within the autonomous decisions of their authorities, a rector's proxy for affairs of the people with disabilities. The role of the proxy is to represent, among others, the rector in operation connected with people with disabilities, and to collect data as well as to prepare information regarding students with disabilities at the university.

Various forms of integrated and inclusive education are becoming an increasingly common form of educating students with disabilities, and universities provide more favourable forms of education and support for such students. It becomes, therefore, an important problem to ensure continuity of education for people with disabilities from preschool to higher education.

In literature of the subject, there are many case studies referring to the functioning of students with disabilities at universities in Poland. They present a reporting nature and relate to initiatives undertaken by various academic centres for solving problems connected with education of people with disabilities (J. Stochmiałek, 2001; H. Sariusz- Wolska, 2003<sup>3</sup>). The other studies deal with the psychosocial and educational aspects of people with disabilities functioning as students (J. Bąbka, 2001; B. Olszak-Krzyżanowska, 2005; M. Garbat, 2005; M. Sendyk, 2005; H. Ochonczenko, 2005; G. Miłkowska, 2005<sup>4</sup>).

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<sup>3</sup> J. Stochmiałek, „Koncepcje edukacji studentów niepełnosprawnych”, „Szkoła. Specjalna”. 2001 nr 5, s. 259-266; H. Sariusz- Wolska H. (red.), „Niepełnosprawność a edukacja akademicka : materiały konferencyjne”, Łódź 2003;

<sup>4</sup> J. Bąbka, „Edukacja integracyjna dzieci pełnosprawnych i niepełnosprawnych”, Poznań 2001; Olszak-Krzyżanowska B., „Formy pomocy doraźnej i wsparcia społecznego studentów niepełnosprawnych”, (w: ) Ochonczenko H., Miłkowska G., „Osoba niepełnosprawna w społeczności akademickiej”, Kraków 2005; M. Garbat, „Programy celowe PFRON szansą osób niepełnosprawnych na zdobycie wykształcenia”, (w) Ochonczenko H., Miłkowska G., „Osoba niepełnosprawna...”; M. Sendyk, „Psychiczne przystosowanie studentów niepełnosprawnych na wyższej uczelni”, (w:), Ochonczenko H., Miłkowska

Education at the tertiary level is regulated by the Act of 27 July 2005<sup>5</sup> and the Act of 18 of March 2011<sup>6</sup> - the Higher Education Act. Therefore, in accordance with the act, students, including the ones with disabilities, have the right to:

- obtain a leave from classes at the university under the procedure and in line with the principles specified in the regulations of studying;
- be transferred from another university, including the foreign one, upon the consent of the dean at the host university, if they fulfilled all the obligations arising from the regulations of the university which they leave;
- study more than one field of study, or study other subjects, also at various universities;
- study according to an individual plan and program of study in accordance with the principles established by the faculty council or other authority specified in the statutes of the university;
- material aid from the funds allocated for this purpose in the state budget in the form of: a social scholarship, a special scholarship, a scholarship for academic or sporting performance, a scholarship of a minister for academic achievements, a scholarship of a minister for outstanding sporting achievements, a scholarship for meals, a scholarship for accommodation, a supplement, the 50% reduction in fees for journeys by public transport.

Under the Act, each university offers various forms of assistance and support for students with disabilities. Here are the detailed rules:

Support in the process of recruitment for studies:

- each university candidate with disabilities is asked to contact an office for the people with disabilities or an office of rector's proxy for the students with disabilities in order to obtain assistance in reaching the station, or accommodation at the time of recruitment (in case of practical exams), or to obtain information how to provide documents;
- in justified cases, the assistance in a recruitment process can be adapted to individual needs of a student;
- providing a student with accommodation at the time of recruitment;
- a care of an assistant in a properly prepared student dormitory.

Support in a didactic process arising from the regulations of study:

- each student with disability is entitled, after obtaining the approval of a dean of the faculty, to an Individual Course of Studies. It gives the right to: an individual adjustments of particular exams listed for passing in the course of study; change a practical class group (after consultation with a lecturer), in order to adapt it to therapeutic needs of the student; higher absenteeism (after consultation with a lecturer); additional consultations relating to current issues discussed; study in a form of continuous session in particular situations connected with ill health (frequent hospitalisations);

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G., „Osoba niepełnosprawna...”; H. Ochonczyńska, „Od inwalidy do osoby niepełnosprawnej”, (w: ), Ochonczyńska H., Miłkowska G., „Osoba niepełnosprawna...”; G. Miłkowska, „Aspiracje życiowe studentów niepełnosprawnych”, (w: ), Ochonczyńska H., Miłkowska G., „Osoba niepełnosprawna...”;

<sup>5</sup> Dz. U. 2005, Nr 164 poz. 1365, z późn. zm.

<sup>6</sup> Dz. U. z 2011 r. Nr 84, poz. 455, Nr 112, poz. 654, z 2012 r. poz. 1544

- each student who has health problems, after obtaining an opinion of an appropriate medical committee, may be granted a sick leave, and the leave can last for a semester or a year depending on the current state of health;
- in justified cases, sick leave may be renewed;
- if student's health improves and he is able to take some of the tests or exams, he may apply to a dean for a special kind of sick leave with the right to take exams.

Universities provide also support for students with disabilities during the educational process, which doesn't result from the regulations of studying. The data obtained by the author in the research indicates that students with disabilities at Polish universities can use the help of an assistant. He shall take notes during the lectures, help in the development of materials, help to get to rehabilitation centres or faculties, as well as help to move at the places. The assistant drives student to necessary places, does the shopping and helps in the library or in other institutions.

People with disabilities may rely on medical care in academic medical clinics, or additional care, such as a care of a neurologist or a neuropsychologist. The students with disabilities can also receive help from a nurse who are on duty mostly in students' dormitories where students with disabilities live. In the period from October to the end of June, medical rehabilitation is provided. Additionally, students may use a swimming pool or a gym free of charge, at stated times. Students are entitled to a sick leave for a longer period of treatment and rehabilitation. Thanks to it, a status and privileges of a student can be retained. Students with disabilities who have mobility problems in some students' dormitories (e.g., Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń), can rely on room service, which includes: room cleaning, doing laundry and ironing.

In terms of material assistance, students with disabilities are entitled to a monthly social scholarship. In addition, they can apply for a scholarship for meals or accommodation. Two times in an academic year, they can apply for a supplement for the purposes of covering the costs of rehabilitation, treatment and unexpected expenses.

In a situation when there is a need for co-financing of taken courses, additional training, trips to conferences and a purchase of rehabilitation equipment, students with disabilities may apply for aid from the special funds allocated for such students.

Students with disabilities, with help of offices for the students with disabilities, use the aid from the State Fund for Rehabilitation of People with Disabilities within the frameworks of numerous programs, including:

- *Student II – a lifelong education of people with disabilities* - funding may cover tuition fees, the costs of accommodation and commuting to school, participation in activities designed to improve physical or mental abilities, the Internet access, as well as the cost of a purchase of objects facilitating or enabling learning, and the costs of trips organised within the classes;
- *Pythagoras – an assistance program for people with hearing loss* - the aim of the program is to ensure that all hard of hearing students, student with both visual and hearing impairment as well as students who are only visually impaired, depending on their needs, can use the help of sign language interpreters, and it is possible for them to use assistive devices during classes and examinations;
- *University for All* - a program for universities which adapts the infrastructure for students with disabilities, and promotes the preparation of information and didactics for their needs;
- *Junior* - a program of professional activation of graduates with disabilities, a part of the national program: 'First Job'. It complements the work of employment offices aimed at graduates, career advisors and employers who have disabilities;
- *Computer for Homer* - the aim of this program is to purchase computers for people who are blind or are visually impaired, provide loans for the purchases as well as finance trainings;

- *Road sign* - the aim of this program is to help students with disabilities in providing them with specialised equipment, particularly with electric wheelchairs.

In terms of teaching aid during examinations, students can apply for: changing a form from written to oral, a larger font on examination sheets as well as extending the duration of exams. An individual course of studies is a standard solution, which allows to balance the necessary trips connected with treatment or rehabilitation, with deadlines of exams and pass marks.

On request, hard of hearing people and people with complete hearing loss can use the help of sign language interpreters during academic classes (e.g., the Jagiellonian University). Student with disability may also, lend voice recorders and FM sets within the academic year. At some universities, there are special computer stations for people with disabilities. They provide students with disabilities, among others, with special, large computer screens and keyboards, as well as the software adapted for the visually impaired. In computer and workshops rooms, there are also created favourable conditions for learning for people with disabilities. There are interactive boards with electronic tablets for writing, which allow you to participate in classes without having to move from where you sit. At many universities (e.g., the Podlasie Academy - now Siedlce University of Natural Sciences and Humanities) students can rent from the Education and Rehabilitation Centre for the People with Disabilities the following equipment: braille machines, laptops with JAWS and MAGic Plus software, miniature enlargers (Mono Mouse, Compactplus) and Milestone 311 Daisy (a device comprising a voice recorder and an MP3 player).

Universities additionally offer a variety of course types, such as: a language course, a course for Driving Licence Category B, and a spatial orientation course in cooperation with Polish Association of the Blind, thanks to which students with disabilities can acquire additional skills needed in everyday life and improve the quality of their life.

Students with impaired hearing can attend speech therapy and also a course of Polish language.

Rehabilitation classes are organised for students with reduced mobility, and also other forms of sporting activities are offered instead of physical education classes. Students have the opportunity to rent such equipment as: wheelchairs, walking frames and crutches. They also have the opportunity to use the library equipped with specialised equipment: Big Keys, Smart Nav and Trackball. Each university also offers students a specialised psychological help.

Polish universities establish and develop cooperation with foreign universities which refers to making the access to school curricula gradually more available for the needs of students with disabilities. One of the projects is Project DARE, which aims at developing and carrying out trainings for academic and administration staff in order to increase awareness and competence related to the functioning of people with disabilities at universities.

When it comes to financing of education for young people with disabilities at university level, preferences aren't applied as automatically as in the education system of primary schools. The higher education is much more financially independent and on a larger scale private. Students pay tuition for their education in the non-public schools which are territorially more accessible. Young people with disabilities can use the support programs offered for example by PFRON, in order to be able to study their preferred faculty. Without this support, they must rely on help of their parents, otherwise it's impossible to study at a university <sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Informacje pochodzą z badań własnych autorki, przeprowadzonych w latach 2007 – 2012 wśród Pełnomocników Rektora ds. Osób Niepełnosprawnych lub Biur Rektora ds. Osób Niepełnosprawnych publicznych uczelni wyższych w Polsce.

Table no. 31

## Students with disabilities in the years 2007 - 2011

Specification		Total	Including women	Deaf and hard of hearing	Blind and partially-sighted	with reduced mobility		Other types of disability
						able to walk	not able to walk	
Year 2007 in total		22 988	13 499	1 491	1 874	5 316	503	13 804
Incl.	Full-time studies	12 569	7 029	872	1 063	2 818	251	7 562
	Part-time studies	10 419	6 470	619	811	2 498	252	6 239
Year 2008 in total		25 256	15 126	1 723	2 042	6 367	560	14 573
Incl.	Full-time studies	13 089	7 364	914	1 137	3 066	277	7 695
	Part-time studies	12 176	7 762	809	905	3 301	283	6 878
Year 2009 in total		27 975	16 661	1 891	2 357	7 368	599	15 760
Incl.	Full-time studies	14 552	8 161	1 029	1 314	3 642	298	8 269
	Part-time studies	13 423	8 500	862	1 043	3 726	301	7 491
Year 2010 in total		30 096	18 117	1 990	2 630	8 069	607	16 800
Incl.	Full-time studies	15 872	8 986	1 104	1 481	4 030	294	8 963
	Part-time studies	14 224	9 131	886	1 149	4 039	313	7 837
Year 2011 in total		30 249	18 357	2 017	2 638	8 051	610	16 933
Incl.	Full-time studies	16 394	9 436	1 175	1 490	4 200	307	9 222
	Part-time studies	13 855	8 921	842	1 148	3 851	303	7 711

Source: „*Szkoły wyższe i ich finanse w 2007 r.*”, GUS (“Higher Education Institutions and their Finances in 2007.”, the Polish Central Statistical Office - GUS)

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Source: „*Szkoły wyższe i ich finanse w 2011 r.*”, GUS (“Higher Education Institutions and their Finances in 2011.”, the Polish Central Statistical Office - GUS)

The research carried out in 2007 by the Polish Central Statistical Office (GUS) and by the author show that at Polish universities studied a total of 22,988 students with disabilities, including 12,569 full-time students and 10,419 part-time students. Among full-time students, there were 7,029 women, and among part-time students there were 6,470 women. Among students with disabilities, there was a total of 1,491 students with hearing loss and hard of hearing students (872 full-time and 619 part-time students); 1,874 of visually impaired and partially visually impaired students (1,063 full-time and 811 part-time students); 5,819 students with reduced mobility (a total of 5,316 students who were able to walk, including 2,818 full-time and 2,498 part-time students; a total of 503 students who were not able to walk, including 251 full-time and 252 part-time students), other types of disability were reported by 13,804 students (7,565 full-time and 6,239 part-time students).

In 2008, at Polish universities studied a total of 25,265 students with disabilities, including 13,089 full-time and 12,176 part-time students. Among the full-time students, there were 7,364 women and among the part-time students there were 7,762 women. Among students with disabilities, there was: a total of 1,723 students with hearing loss and hard of hearing students (914 full-time and 809 part-time students); 2,042 of visually impaired and partially visually impaired students (1,137 full-time and 905 part-time students); 6,927 students with reduced mobility (a total of 6,367 students who were able to walk, including 3,066 full-time and 3,301 part-time students; a total of 560 students who were not able to walk, including 277 full-time and 283 part-time students), other types of disability were reported by 14,573 students (7,695 full-time and 6,878 part-time students).

In 2009, at Polish universities studied a total of 27,975 students with disabilities, including 14,552 full-time and 13,423 part-time students. Among the full-time students, there were 8,161 women and among the part-time students, there were 8,500 women. Among students with disabilities there was: a total of 1,891 students with hearing loss and hard of hearing students (1,029 full-time and 862 part-time students); 2,357 of visually impaired and partially visually impaired students (1,314 full-time and 1,043 part-time students); 7,967 students with reduced mobility (a total of 7,368 students who were able to walk, including 3,642 full-time and 3,726 part-time students; a total of 599 students who were not able to walk, including 298 full-time and 301 part-time students), other types of disability were reported by 15,760 students (8,269 full-time and 6,878 part-time students).

In 2010, at Polish universities studied a total of 30,096 students with disabilities, including 15,872 full-time and 14,224 part-time students. Among the full-time students, there were 8,986 women and among the part-time students, there were 9,131 women. Among students with disabilities there was: a total of 1,990 students with hearing loss and hard of hearing students (1,104 full-time and 886 part-time students); 2,630 of visually impaired and partially visually impaired students (1,481 full-time and 1,149 part-time students); 8,676 students with reduced mobility (a total of 8,069 students who were able to walk, including 4,030 full-time and 4,039 part-time students; a total of 607 students who were not able to walk, including 294 full-time and 313 part-time students), other types of disability were reported by 16,800 students (8,963 full-time and 7,837 part-time students).

The research carried out in 2011 by the Polish Central Statistical Office (GUS) and by the author show that at Polish universities studied a total of 30,249 students with disabilities, including 16,394 full-time students and 13,855 part-time students. Among full-time students, there were

9,436 women, and among part-time students there were 8,921 women. Among students with disabilities, there was a total of 2,017 students with hearing loss and hard of hearing students (1,175 full-time and 842 part-time students); 2,638 of visually impaired and partially visually impaired students (1,490 full-time and 1,148 part-time students); 8,661 students with reduced mobility (a total of 8,051 students who were able to walk, including 4,200 full-time and 3,851 part-time students; a total of 610 students who were not able to walk, including 307 full-time and 303 part-time students), other types of disability were reported by 16,933 students (9,222 full-time and 7,711 part-time students).

Taking into account the type of higher education institutions, the research carried out by the Polish Central Statistical Office (GUS) and by the author showed that in the academic year 2010/2011 at Polish higher education institutions studied a total of 30,249 students with disabilities, including 10,259 students with disabilities at universities (7,151 full-time and 3,108 part-time students); at technical higher education institutions studied 4,387 students (including 3,352 full-time and 1,035 part-time students); at agricultural higher education institutions studied 968 students (including 745 full-time and 223 part-time students); at higher education institutions of economics studied 4,036 students (including 848 full-time and on-time 3,188 students); at other types of higher education institutions studied 1,771 students (including 858 full-time and 913 part-time students); at medical academies studied 783 students (including 609 full-time and 174 part-time students); at maritime higher education institutions studied 101 people (including 61 full-time and 40 part-time students); at physical education academies studied 180 people with disabilities (including 123 full-time and 57 part-time students); at higher education institutions of art studied 231 students (including 151 full-time in 80 part-time students); at higher education institutions of theology studied 158 people (including 103 full-time and 55 part-time students), at other higher education institutions studied 7,208 students (including 2,253 full-time and 4,955 part-time students); at higher education institutions of the National Defence department studied a total of 157 students (including 134 full-time and 23 part-time students).

### *Summary*

"The higher education should be available for people with disabilities" - this principle, which was formulated by Professor Lesław Szczerba and a group of his colleagues (the Podlasie Academy - now Siedlce University of Natural Sciences and Humanities) is adopted and implemented by a growing number of Polish universities.

*"Education is a value, hope and a mission as well as the important tool of development of a society and every human being. People in Poland and in Europe are becoming a 'learning society'. It is our right, duty and opportunity. Opportunity also for people, to whom the fate was not as favourable as to others"*<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Ochonczenko H., Miłkowska G., (red.), „*Osoba niepełnosprawna w społeczności akademickiej*”, Kraków 2005, s. 9

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