

THE DEGREE COMPLETION PROCEDURE AT UNIVERSITIES ON THE EXAMPLE OF LOMZA STATE UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES

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Abstract: The degree completion procedure at universities is the final result of acquiring knowledge, skills and competencies at a particular field of study. Its role is crucial not only in the context of receiving a professional title, which provides an access pass for performing numerous professions, but also from the Polish security point of view. Gaining the entitlements by the persons possessing proper predispositions is significant due to the possibility of holding important positions in the country. This issue was the subject of analysis conducted by the author in her Master thesis written under the supervision of professor Mirosława Melezini. The dissertation was written before the enforcement of the so-called Constitution for Science and contains the analysis of the legal position of that time. The article contains a part pertaining to the legal basis connected with the degree completion procedure.

Key words: higher education, Lomza State University of Applied Sciences, degree completion procedure, diploma examination, universities

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Introduction

Lomza State University of Applied Sciences (further PWSiIP) was established on the basis of the Regulation issued by the Council of Ministers on 22 June 2004 on establishing the State University of Applied Sciences in Lomza [1]. It is a vocational university, which offers first and second cycle degrees as well as long-cycle programmes, full-time and extramural. It is authorized to educate in the following fields of study: Bachelor degree courses (Administration, Dietetics, Philology, Cosmetology, Pedagogy, Nursing, Social Work, Physical Education, Management), Engineering (Automation and Robotics, Computer Science, Food Technology), Master degree courses (Administration second-cycle, Physiotherapy, Computer Science second-cycle, Law, Nursing second-cycle).

It also offers post-graduate studies, courses and trainings. It belongs to the Group of State Vocational Universities, which was established under the act of 26 June 1997 on Vocational Universities [2], mainly in the former voivodeship cities. The university is distinguished by a practical profile of education. According to the statutory definition of Article 2 section 1 point 18ea, it means that the profile of the curriculum covers the modules of classes that allow a student to gain practical skills and social competencies, implemented under the assumption that over half of the studies' programme defined in ECTS grading scale covers practical classes that shape these skills and competencies, including the skills gained during workshops, which are conducted by people possessing professional experience obtained outside the university [3]. From the point of view

of a potential graduate, who after gaining a professional degree quickly wants to find employment in his or her profession, the possibility of learning and understanding how the acquired knowledge can be utilized in fulfilling job duties seems to be very attractive. The practical approach to education is also highlighted by the university's mission statement, which is focused on three words – 'we educate practitioners' [4].

Gaining higher education is a complex process, consisting of stages, which number depends on the field of study. The key element of education is a diploma examination, the positive result of which decides on receiving a professional title and implies the completion of studies. Taking the exam is possible after fulfilling requirements stated in the Study Regulations of Lomza State University of Applied Sciences [5] (hereinafter: the Study Regulations). One of them is receiving a positive assessment of a diploma dissertation. Depending on the field of study, the preparation of the dissertation begins at various stages of studies and the subjects such as introductory seminars, seminars, or undergraduate thesis seminars (hereinafter referred to as seminars) serve this purpose. They aim at preparing the student to write a diploma dissertation, consult progress as well as solve emerging doubts. They are conducted by academic teachers, who can also be supervisors of the dissertation, however, they can also be run by other lecturers. Such a solution functions e.g. in the fields of study such as Philology and Computer Science. The role of a supervisor is to assist in the selection of the subject matter of a diploma dissertation, monitor the content of the dissertation, advise

the student on the direction he or she should take as well as solve the emerging problems.

Legal bases

Gaining higher education in Poland is regulated by normative acts. It is connected with going through a particular educational process, the final objective of which is to defend a diploma dissertation. Being awarded with a university degree gives the possibility to apply for the job post, usually with attractive remuneration. It also enables personal development, or social advancement. In relation to the students of Administration, who may be interested in working in public offices and institutions, it is necessary to hold a university degree in order to apply for free vacancies. The possibility of performing function in public or self-government administration, which main aim is to serve the society and fulfil essential tasks for efficient functioning of the state, demands gaining knowledge, competencies as well as practical skills. Allowing students to perform the profession, which can have the connection with and influence on issues linked with security, or country's stability, should be preceded by checking his or her state of knowledge and verifying the results assumed in the particular field of study. Such form of verification is a diploma examination, the integral part of which constitutes a diploma dissertation prepared by a student.

The foundations of higher education in Poland are the provisions of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 2 April 1997 [6] contained in Article 70. They guarantee the right to education for everybody as well as free education in public schools. It does not mean, however, that a public high school cannot charge for providing educational services. It is allowed in cases regulated by the act proper for higher education. Previously, it was regulated by the Act on Higher Education (further: u.p.s.w.) in Article 98 section 1 [3]. An important matter is that the Constitution does not restrict the range of subjects, which can be conducted by higher education institutions. The right to set up non-public universities pertains either to citizens as well as institutions and the manner of their activity is regulated by a separate act proper for higher education. The Basic Law indicates the obligation of public authorities to provide citizens with a universal and equal access to education. In order to fulfil this obligation, the special systems of individual financial and organizational assistance are created and provided for pupils and students. It means that Polish state authorities do not only prepare curricula, but also provide the students with a source of finance, which significantly influences the increase in higher education accessibility. This guarantee is of a particular importance for people, whose financial condition does not allow to commence studies especially in bigger university centres. For people with disabilities, the possibi-

lity of receiving support not only in the financial dimension, but also by implementing facilities adequate to their needs, allow them to commence and finish studies. For the great majority of them, it constitutes an access pass to work in their dream job, which makes them financially independent and limits the risk of social exclusion. For higher education institutions, it is an important issue to provide them with autonomy. It enables them to decide, within the agreements included in acts, on the conducted fields of study, undertaken research, forms of educating academics etc. It also means that the ministry cannot impose its statement to universities without including the opinion of university authorities in such cases [7].

The legal bases are common for various types of universities, although under the previous regulation, since the second half of the 1990s, there were separate acts for public and non-public vocational universities as well as for higher military education institutions. Lomza State University of Applied Sciences, since its emergence on 1 July 2004, based its functioning on the Act of 26 June 1997 on Vocational Universities [2], which included in Article 6 the entitlements to award a professional title of a Bachelor or an Engineer and delegated to the Minister of Higher Education the possibility to define other professional titles awarded by the university. It also applied, by virtue of the references, regulations of the Act on Higher Education of 12 September 1990 [8]. The basic regulation of the university's activity was the then effective u.p.s.w. of 27 July 2005 [3] as well as the implementing acts. The act described, among others, the ways the system of higher education is to function, its system of governance, including the most significant guidelines connected with gaining a professional title. In relation to the aforementioned act, it should be mentioned that it had a unified version of 2017 and since the time of its announcement by the notice of the Marshal of the Sejm [9], it has been several times amended.

It should be indicated what issues connected with the degree completion procedure were delegated by the legislator to the minister responsible for higher education and what regulations were passed on this basis. It will allow a comprehensive introduction of the regulations connected with a diploma dissertation constituting an access pass to a diploma examination.

The first delegation connected with the degree completion procedure is indicated in Article 162 point 4, 6 f-g [3], which shows that the minister responsible for higher education shall define, by issuing a regulation, the conditions that the Study Regulations at universities need to comply with, including the procedure of conducting, upon the application of a student or a supervisor, an open diploma examination as well as conditions that need to be fulfilled in order to be admitted to a diploma examination and to complete studies. On this basis, the Ordinance of the Minister

of Science and Higher Education of 25 September 2014 was issued on the conditions which the provisions of the Study Regulations at universities have to comply with [10]. It indicated the scope of subjects that the universities' Study Regulations should have included and specified. Among them, there is an indication in § 1 point 12 [10] to regulate the scope and conditions of conducting diploma examinations as well as preparing diploma dissertations in a foreign language. Pointing out the possibility to take the examination in a foreign language enabled proper verification of skills held by the students of philological fields of study.

Leaving the freedom of constructing the Study Regulations allowed universities to adjust the content of the Regulations to their specificity and offered fields of study. Preparation of the catalogue of the compulsory entries in the Regulations protected students' interests. They were able to find the most significant provisions. It also influenced the unification of the regulations at all universities and thus the scope of students' rights. They were able to change the university they studied at for another one, in connection with the mandatory regulation of this issue in the Study Regulations.

Another delegation of entitlements to the minister responsible for higher education is indicated in Article 167 section 3 [3]. The minister will define, by issuing a regulation:

1. professional titles for first and second-cycle studies graduates as well as the long-cycle ones, including the already existing professional titles,
2. the conditions of issuing a diploma as well as its necessary elements, including the joint diplomas and certificates of post-graduate studies as well as the way of placing graphic symbols informing about the level of the Polish Qualifications Framework, referred to in Article 10 in the act of 22 December 2015 on the Integrated Qualifications System, by taking into account the educational levels and forms as well as the types of professional titles,
3. the template of a diploma supplement, including the scope of the necessary information.

By making use of this right, the Minister of Science and Higher Education issued regulation of 10 February 2017 on professional titles granted to graduates, the conditions of granting as well as the compulsory elements of diplomas and certificates of post-graduate studies completion as well as a diploma supplement template [11]. The determined requirements were linked with the last stage of the degree completion procedure and constituted a very valuable source of information for the Dean's Office employees. This act introduced unified guidelines for every university in Poland, which in the context of issuing documents entitling to perform a particular profession is very important. It ena-

bled easy identification of authentic diplomas compared to the counterfeit ones that include different pieces of information.

Another delegation of entitlements included in Article 192 of the u.p.s.w. [3], indicated that the minister responsible for higher education will define, by issuing a regulation, the way the university should prepare documentation of the course of studies, make amendments and issue duplicates, authenticate documents intended for legal relations with foreign countries as well as the amount and way of charging for these services as well as for issuing a diploma of the studies completion, copies in foreign languages as well as issuing duplicates of those documents. The legal act pertaining to this matter was the Ordinance of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 16 September 2016 on the documentation of the course of studies [12]. It indicated in § 10 section 1 [12] the compulsory elements of the diploma examination documentation. The protocol prepared by the Dean's Office employees included:

- examination date,
- student's names and surname,
- album number,
- names and surnames, signatures as well as academic titles, academic degrees or professional titles of the examination committee's members,
- questions asked and grades obtained,
- average grade received during studies,
- title and assessment of a diploma dissertation,
- assessment of a diploma examination,
- the final result of studies,
- professional title received.

Regulation of the protocols' range is important in relation to the prominence of a diploma examination, which result conditions a graduate's position in the labour market.

The Act on Higher Education in Article 99a [3] indicated an important catalogue of issues for a student, which are free of charge. Among them, there are matters connected with the degree completion procedure. It was guaranteed that students do not have to pay for taking a diploma examination and for submitting and assessing a diploma dissertation as well as issuing a supplement to a diploma. It is significant from the accessibility to a diploma examination point of view, which potential valuation could constitute a barrier for some students. Especially, the necessity of repeating an examination and the costs connected with it could greatly limit the number of students finishing studies. The existence of regulations in this shape did not mean that a student did not bear any costs in connection with gaining a professional title. It also minimized the appearance of the phenomena of not passing a diploma examination due to financial causes as well as the willingness of increasing financial assets of a university through charges for repeating the examination.

Under Article 164 section 2 [3], it was possible to, among others, conduct diploma examinations in a foreign language in the scope and on conditions stated in the Study Regulations. Additionally, the diploma dissertations could be prepared in a foreign language. The date of completing the studies was the date of passing the diploma examination.

Being allowed to take a diploma examination depended on fulfilling the following conditions:

- receiving a positive assessment of a diploma dissertation,
- obtaining the number of ECTS grades depending on the level of education:
 - first-cycle studies – at least 180 ECTS grades,
 - second-cycle studies – at least 90 ECTS grades,
 - Long-cycle studies – at least 300 ECTS grades in the system of five-year programmes as well as 360 ECTS grades in the system of six-year programmes.

The catalogue of the demanded number of ECTS grades could be extended on the basis of Article 164a section 3 [3] by the minister responsible for higher education, including the areas of education, fields of study and education levels.

Not submitting a diploma dissertation and diploma examination on time, on the basis of Article 190 section 1 point 3 [3], implied that a student is expelled by the head of the basic organizational unit.

Universities controlled the authenticity of diploma dissertations, which are the basis for the award of a degree. Due to this, under Article 193 [3], the competent body decided on the invalidity of the procedure of granting a professional title if in the dissertation, constituting the basis for it, the candidate for the title has appropriated the authorship of a major part or other elements of another person's work or research findings. The Rector was entitled to reopen the proceedings of awarding a professional title and issuing a diploma as well as annul a decision on awarding a professional title and issuing a diploma, under Article 207 section 3 [3].

The graduates obtained, on the basis of Article 167 [3], university diplomas certifying a successful completion of studies, proving a proper professional title as well as supplements to the diplomas. The diploma template was previously approved by the Academic Senate. The Rector immediately passed the approved diploma template to the minister supervising the university as well as to the minister responsible for higher education.

The characteristics of diploma dissertations

While studying the degree completion procedure at universities, it should be stated what a diploma dissertation really was. Its position in the process of education was very

strong, what was indicated by Article 167a section 1 in connection with Article 167 section 2 of the u.p.s.w. [3]. Completing studies depended on passing a diploma examination, the access pass to which constituted a positive assessment of a diploma dissertation. It implied the impossibility of gaining a professional title without preparing a dissertation. As was indicated by the Voivodeship Administrative Court in Warsaw in the verdict of 14 April 2008, II SA/Wa 100/08: 'professional title is gained the day the diploma examination is passed, which proves the completion of studies at the particular field of study, which is connected with gaining a determined professional title. In other words – only the professional title (Master's degree or equivalent) obtained at a university is the proof of the completion of higher education at the particular field of study' [13]. It confirms the key significance of a diploma dissertation in the academic degree completion procedure and indicates the impossibility of taking the examination without preparing the dissertation.

According to the legislator's stance included in Article 167a section 2 in the Act on u.p.s.w., a diploma dissertation was an individual study of a particular scientific or artistic matter or an artistic achievement presenting the student's general knowledge and skills connected with the particular field of study, educational level and profile and the abilities of independently drawing analyses and conclusions [3]. It indicates the relation between the subject matter of a diploma dissertation and the specificity of the field of study as well as with the selected educational path. Due to educational level connected with the particular field of study, one can distinguish the following types of dissertations:

- Undergraduate dissertation,
- Engineering dissertation,
- Master thesis,
- Doctoral thesis.

They were distinguished by the period of acquiring knowledge, on the basis of which the dissertations were prepared. It was conditioned by a different substantive scope of dissertations written under the guidance of a supervisor. The individual aspect of a dissertation was connected with a significant input of own work. It was prohibited to provide other people's dissertations or their parts as own. The elaboration should present the skills the student gained during the course of studies.

The variety of the fields of study offered by a university and the specificity connected with them condition the emergence of various forms of diploma dissertations. The Act on Higher Education in Article 167a section 3 indicated that a diploma dissertation can especially be a written work, published article, design work, including the project or the creation of a computer program or system as well as construction, technological and artistic work [3]. It was

an open catalogue. Enabling the adjustment of the dissertation's form to the specificity of a particular field of study influenced the quality of dissertations, which could reflect authors' interests, present creative approach to the particular task. It simplified the selection of the subject matter and allowed to verify practical skills of the seminar participants.

The act did not define separately the standards of a diploma dissertation for particular educational levels and profiles. It restricted itself to a synthetic statement that this dissertation should present the student's general knowledge and skills connected with the particular field of study, educational level and profile. The specific criteria for diploma dissertations, therefore, derived from the Study Regulations as well as the description of educational results [14]. It caused the non-uniformity of the way the dissertations were prepared, which allowed the adjustment of the rules for elaborating dissertations on the basis of the particular field of study and university's profile characteristics. At Lomza State University of Applied Sciences, in relation to the implementation of undergraduate, engineering and Master programmes, the concept of a diploma dissertation was specified in § 43 of the Study Regulations [5]. It was an individual elaboration of the indicated practical matter in the subject proper to the field of study, educational level and profile in which the student deliberately and skilfully uses the educational results acquired during the course of studies. It is related to the practical profile of the university, which should be reflected also in the students' diploma dissertations. The dissertation's definition is extended in the following sections indicating its form. It can be written work, published article, design work, including the project or the creation of a computer program or system as well as construction, or technological work. A diploma dissertation can constitute the element of the University's research work programme or a student research group study, but it can also be prepared in cooperation with an external body on condition that student's individual contribution will be explicitly indicated. Those solutions do not only show the students that they have a wide scope of possibilities, but also direct them on how their idea of work can evaluate. It can encourage students participating in the student research groups to undertake a greater intellectual effort. On the example of students of Automation and Robotics, it is clear that they have the possibility of constructing robots, on the basis of the acquired knowledge, which will not only constitute the form of a diploma dissertation, but will also reflect their interests. The Study Regulations enables in § 44 section 3 [5] the possibility of preparing a dissertation by a team of students. However, it is essential to precisely indicate individual input of particular co-authors. It is a chance to elaborate a dissertation based on knowledge and skills of students from various specialities or fields of study. It is likely that the students of Computer Science speciali-

zing in programming will collaborate with the students of Automation and Robotics possessing engineering skills. The result will be the creation of a working device performing the programmed activities.

The notion of a diploma dissertation is, therefore, wide and is not restricted only to preparing written work. Depending on the field of study and provisions of the proper Study Regulations, it can indicate other forms of dissertations. It enhances the possibility for the student to decide on the last work in his or her course of studies, which can be an access pass to perform their dream profession.

European Union Regulations

The law of the European Union has a direct impact on higher education in Poland. The Bologna Declaration, signed on 19 June 1999 by 29 European Union's ministers responsible for higher education, greatly influenced the shape of this system. Although the very Bologna Process expands beyond the borders of the European Union, it is supported by the European Commission. Every member state of the European Union independently shapes its education policy and takes into account the context of the signed Bologna Declaration:

- implementing the system of 'easily readable' and comparable degrees (diplomas),
- implementing the two-cycle studies,
- implementing the grading scale system of proving students' achievements (ECTS),
- eliminating obstacles restricting students and employees mobility,
- cooperating in the field of providing the quality of education,
- promoting European issues in education [15].

Comparing degrees as well as legibility of diplomas are connected with the facilitation of defining the level and character of the obtained education. It is implemented by issuing supplements to diplomas. They include the description of the most significant issues connected with the programme at the particular field of study, the course of studies and individual achievements of a student.

The two-cycle manner of studies means a departure from educating at most fields of study in a long-cycle manner. The course of studies is divided into first-cycle and second-cycle. The first-cycle studies are characterized by a period of 3 years and end up with a Bachelor's degree, or 3.5 years – with an Engineering degree. Second-cycle studies last two years and finish with being awarded with Master's degree. This solution allows the student of first-cycle studies to continue education at a similar field of study and receiving the Master's degree there. It can enhance not only the educational level of graduates, but also facilitate the management of their educational path.

Introducing the ECTS grading scale is to facilitate student's mobility. ECTS grades are attributed to particular subjects in numerical form. Its number is to reflect the workload necessary to perform in order to implement particular educational results attributed to the subject. Functioning of those indicators facilitates the comparison of studies programmes at various universities.

Improving the educational quality in the area the Bologna Declaration functions demands cooperation. It is believed that the issue of educational quality is strictly linked with university's autonomy [15]. The existence of the consensus platform connected with educational quality in the European Union, serving to exchange experience, can lead to improving the whole process of education based on the verified practices.

One of the freedoms connected with the European Union membership is the free movement of people. In the context of linking higher education with this rule, the recognition of diplomas and certificates should be indicated, which allows to undertake professional work there. Any exceptions in the recognition of documents proving the completion of studies can be linked with the access to the posts relevant from the national security point of view. The recognition pertains to the two types of documents on education:

- diplomas for academic purposes, i.e. for further education,
- diplomas for professional purposes, i.e. commencement of work (performing profession) – especially in the case when it is connected with the necessity of obtaining special qualifications [15].

It influences the possibility of continuing education abroad, without the necessity to commence studies from the very beginning. It is an advantage and a condition to participate in various mobility programmes, such as Erasmus+. Improving access to the labour market, especially connected with possessing professional knowledge, facilitates not only the possibility of finding employment, but it also enables the exchange of experience connected with the specificity of the particular branch of industry.

Summary

Legal framework constitutes the basis for organizing education process as well as receiving a professional title. Its transparency and specificity enable the implementation of equal national legislation. It is connected with the stability of the legal system and regulations which constitute the basis for the whole degree completion procedure. The statutory guarantees for the students form an access pass for equal access to higher education and the possibility of using the mobility programs increases the chances of the future graduates on the labour market.

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