



# Effective Education for Employment: Warsaw, Poland Interview Series

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## Introduction

The following interviews took place in May 2010

Participants were asked questions relating to the themes of the Effective Education for Employment project, namely: the disconnect between the demands of employers and the output of our current education systems, the implications of a rapidly globalizing world, and what needs to happen to deliver fit for purpose education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Poland is often cited as having one of the strongest economies of the former communist countries in Eastern Europe with a successful transition from a centrally planned to a largely market driven economy in 1989. As testament to how this transition has been successfully built on, the Polish economy showed remarkable resilience in becoming the only EU country to avoid recession in 2009.

Education reform in Poland is the subject of much study and is seen as key to building a strong innovation policy, developing a larger knowledge economy and ensuring that all levels of education remains sufficiently close to the needs of Industry to support continued growth, as well as preventing a brain drain of young polish professionals looking for opportunities abroad. Education is also seen as key to ensuring that Poland's future workforce is able to exploit the potentials of the globalized marketplace and appreciate and fully benefit from their role as a member state of the European Union.



# The Interviews

# Anna Świebocka-Nerkowska

Director of Human Resources Development Unit, Polish Agency for Enterprise Development (PARP)



The purpose of the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development (PARP) is to support entrepreneurship through the implementation of activities aimed at using innovative solutions by entrepreneurs, development of human resources, the expansion of international markets and regional development. Anna Świebocka-Nerkowska's work at the agency is focused on developing and stimulating enterprising attitudes and behaviours through vocational education.

## Understanding the Educational Needs of Industry

Our interview begins with Mrs Świebocka-Nerkowska explaining that understanding and addressing the gap between employers and education is the focus of her work at PARP. She describes an on-going tracking study initiated by PARP looking at 'human capital' in this context – asking employers exactly what they need from their people: "We analysed the whole market... asking enterprises what they have now (in terms of skills, qualifications and competencies) and what they really need from their people moving forward – this covered skills, attitudes and behaviours."

She points out that this is vital work, as what employers say they want in job descriptions/advertisements for positions often doesn't match what they say in person. Additionally, Mrs Świebocka-Nerkowska points out that small business managers in particular often don't fully understand their own needs, making the job of analysing – and then addressing – these needs at a macro level very difficult.

## Defining the Gap between Enterprise and Education

Mrs Świebocka-Nerkowska goes on to outline how – as in every country visited during the Effective Education for Employment research programme – soft skills such as communication and teamwork are needed more and more in the Polish economy. She believes, however, that this need is not being adequately addressed in schools and colleges, and that outdated pedagogical models are hindering potential progress heralded by the introduction of technology in the classroom: "Soft skills are not considered... we learn by rote, based on an old formula of education which is still in place, even if we are now using PCs in the classroom."

Mrs Świebocka-Nerkowska makes the argument that as more and more work is performed in a collaborative group environment, cooperation and associated skills need to be embedded into the learning experience. She makes it quite clear that whilst some schools are adapting to new paradigms of learning and working, it is the lack of focus on preparing individuals for the workplace that is responsible for this situation: "It

should be education for employment, but quite simply, it's not. In Poland education is for education – not for employment."

## Core Competencies for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Mrs Świebocka-Nerkowska then defines a set of core competencies which she believes are essential for meeting the demands of the rapidly changing Polish workplace:

### Cooperation and team work

People will still need to work as individuals, but finding a role within a group, performing as a group member is a basic skill now for many jobs.

### Adaptability to change

As human beings we like stability, but the only thing that is stable now is permanent change.

### Communication

You need to be able to communicate your needs, your ideas and you need to be able to network with other people. For me this is absolutely crucial.

Whilst recognising the value of innovation and creativity, Mrs Świebocka-Nerkowska believes that an innovative mindset is engendered by the culture of a business or organisation: "This is about creating the right environment...if you are too strict with procedures innovation doesn't happen. In this respect we (the Polish) have an advantage as we are not a very procedural nation – the Communist political system forced flexibility as part of survival!"

*/// (As human beings we like stability, but) the only thing that is stable now is permanent change. ///*

## Measuring Skills and Competencies – A Lack of Comparative Frameworks

We then move on to a discussion around the measurement of skills and competencies, and how the controversial subject of certifying individuals' abilities in terms of communication and teamwork might be addressed in Poland.

Mrs Świebocka-Nerkowska explains that the European Qualification Framework has not been adopted by Poland, and that there is no comprehensive comparative framework for vocational education. She argues that, in effect, it is therefore impossible to usefully measure qualifications across different sectors, let alone make comparisons with other countries in the EU – a serious problem for those looking to transfer skills and experience in the context of life-long learning.

Regarding soft skills, Mrs Świebocka-Nerkowska feels that competencies including communication and managerial skills are difficult to measure or certify in isolation, but that they could be assessed alongside 'hard' skills, by looking at how people perform on the job. She believes this approach would be beneficial to the country as a whole, as it would help individuals build a broad portfolio of transferable skills that could be built on as careers develop and progress: "This type of measurement would help Polish workers to build a full life-long learning portfolio... We now have those with hard skills – plumbers, for example – assessed and certified, but we need to know how to combine that with the competencies we know are so important for all jobs now."

## Education and Entrepreneurship

Mrs Świebocka-Nerkowska goes on to explain how entrepreneurship is now explicitly taught in schools in Poland – a progressive and even unique situation previously unheard of in our global study of Effective Education for Employment.

Whilst she recognises that the teaching of entrepreneurship as a stand-alone subject in schools is a positive thing, Mrs Świebocka-Nerkowska notes that it is invariably taught using theoretical models, and often based on a study of business management skills: “For me, this is unfortunate. I believe that understanding and learning about entrepreneurship is about behaviour and attitudes. It’s about being an active person, looking for new challenges and being open.”

## Encouraging the Polish Entrepreneurial Spirit

Interestingly, recent research in Poland has shown that 30-35% of young people say they would like to manage their own company, and many people in Poland already run one person or micro businesses.

Mrs Świebocka-Nerkowska believes that Poland’s entrepreneurial spirit is evidenced in these statistics, but is concerned that there are some significant barriers around encouraging entrepreneurship in Poland. She believes the main problem can be put down to the status of business people and entrepreneurs in general: “Entrepreneurs are often treated with suspicion in Poland... When someone has much more money than you it is often assumed it was got in an illegal way.”

She describes this suspicion as symptomatic of a low level of social capital, a situation exacerbated by the state’s apparent suspicion of business people in recent years: “They (administration and parts of society) regard entrepreneurs as thieves. We have a lot of well known business people who have been destroyed by the tax office. This way of thinking is very deep in our minds, and is due to our previous political system and low social capital – in Poland we don’t trust each other.”

In light of this, a large scale campaign by one of Poland’s national newspapers is now underway to change perceptions of entrepreneurs, and PARP itself is also orchestrating a campaign in 2011 to challenge popular misconceptions about entrepreneurs and encourage those already in business to grow their enterprises and so create employment opportunities across the country.

## The Role of Business in Education

Mrs Świebocka-Nerkowska is absolutely clear that business and industry need to have a significant role in communicating their skills requirements if Poland is to continue on its upward trajectory. She cites several examples of how large Polish companies with the investment of international/foreign capital have been proactive in building connections between employers and the education sector. These companies include the ArcelorMittal steel company, TP S.A. (Polish Telecom owned by France Telecom) and Vattenfall. ArcelorMittal has identified that they will be facing a lack of suitably qualified engineers within 10 years and have started to define their needs and form partnerships with Universities to help address the impending skills gap.

Another example can be seen with Toyota, which has identified problems with a lack of fully qualified graduates which will adversely affect the

capacity of their Polish workforce if unchecked.

Mrs Świebocka-Nerkowska outlines how companies such as Toyota are now talking directly to schools (at local level) and providing direct funding for equipment to help address the problem – another example of progressive activity in the Polish education sector: “In Poland many BPO projects are active on the basis of young, well-educated Polish students and young people. BPO companies (e.g. Infosys BPO (Business Process Outsourcing) from Łódź) take part in the Business Council which is organized at the management faculty level in University of Łódź (this kind of councils are organized in most of Polish good higher education institutions or faculties), where they can influence a direction of the education program. This again can be done by companies which are aware of the importance of this kind of activity and are interested in the adaptation of the education formula to its needs. On the other hand, secondary schools and higher education institutions will talk to the companies which are important players on the local or regional labour market.”

Although these examples are inspiring, Mrs Świebocka-Nerkowska points out that only the biggest companies and those with considerable resources at their disposal have the opportunity to directly influence the direction and outcomes of education in this way.

She is also aware that a danger exists in that companies are currently only looking to influence education design in their own sector and at local level, and are not, to her knowledge, lobbying Government for fundamental educational reform.

### **Education Reform in Poland**

Although the National Qualification Framework in Poland is in the process of being implemented, Mrs Świebocka-Nerkowska is concerned that this is not being done in partnership with companies. She also points out that there is no infrastructure in place to facilitate dialogue between business and education and no solid research base that could lead to a strategy to addressing the issue: “Business representatives are not very active or, on the whole, involved with education design in Poland...There are no strategic conversations happening about this issue and this really is a problem.”

When asked how she would approach educational reform in Poland, Mrs Świebocka-Nerkowska sees evidence-based policy as the starting point. She states that this must be built around analysis of every level of education in order to build a new strategic framework based on the needs of business.

### **Vocational Education – The Status Problem**

In spite of the value of vocational education evidenced by Poland’s high levels of skilled workers and the economic migration of Polish workers to other parts of the EU, vocational training and education is still seen as lower status in relation to academic study: “I can’t understand why this is the case. The biggest unemployment rates are with people who have a lack of education, but those with vocational qualifications are employed. Vocational training and education is needed and needed more and more in Poland.”

Mrs Świebocka-Nerkowska details how in recent years Poland has closed many vocational schools under a national reform scheme which introduced 'gymnasium' in place of vocational schools and technical colleges. She believes that this has directly resulted in an increase in a skills shortage in key sectors: "We have a lack of people able to enter the labour market with those levels of skills... For example those working in restaurants, hotels, construction... Come on – you don't have to go to a university to be a plumber."

### **The Ideal Experience of Education**

Mrs Świebocka-Nerkowska then outlines her personal vision of the ideal education system – a description of what learning could be like for children.

She states that if a child's experience is to be ideal, it needs to start at the earliest level possible: kindergarten. Mrs Świebocka-Nerkowska feels the focus should be shifted away from traditional, individual activities such as colouring and preparing children for writing towards more group-based activities that develop social and communication skills.

Secondly, she argues that students in primary school should be taught skills of analytical thinking and problem solving (both independently and in groups) though the use of simulations and games: "Practical learning is everything – not learning by memory. Now we have the internet, we can present problems to students, give them data and let them solve problems individually and in groups... And we can monitor them as they are doing this."

Finally, Mrs Świebocka-Nerkowska explains that at secondary school and higher education level students should be given as much real life, workplace-based educational opportunities as possible through internships and activities that simulate working life: "When I was studying I wasn't given any practical experience.. and today you have people attending construction college who have not even been on a building site – to me this is a sick situation."

We finish the interview with Mrs Świebocka-Nerkowska's vision for education for employment in Poland – a strong, simple message that she delivers with passion and clarity: "I would start with a strategy and base that strategy on evidence. I am afraid we don't know what we are aiming for or where we are going. A strategy is being built for higher education institutions now, but when you look at that you will not find a word about what happens after you leave education – not a single word about how to find a job and what you do when you start work.

Put simply, I would focus on a strategy based on business needs."

# Dr Małgorzata Bonikowska

Advisor, Centre for Human Resources Development (CRZL)

Dr Bonikowska juggles a busy career as Advisor to the Centre for Human Resources Development, running a publishing and consulting company and continuing her academic career as a researcher, lecturer, tutor and education project manager. She has also worked for, among others, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Regional Development, the Ministry of Health and the Prime Minister's Office. She has a wealth of international experience, having been a visiting scholar at Columbia University's Political Science Department in New York, studying in France and Italy, and completing EU projects abroad, among others, in Bulgaria, India and the Balkans.

## Effect of the European Social Fund

Dr Bonikowska begins by explaining that Poland is currently the biggest recipient of the European Social Fund (ESF), with a considerable part of the budget for subsidising training and post-graduate studies. Whilst positive for the country in many ways, Dr Bonikowska points out that European subsidies for education have created a distortion of the educational services market in Poland.

Prior to this huge injection of funding, competition within Poland's education sector was driven by quality rather than price. Today, the situation is reversed. Due to the large price differential between funded and unfunded providers, learners are no longer interested in unsubsidised courses.

Dr Bonikowska argues that there has been a concurrent commercialisation of higher education institutions that, stimulated by the possibility of EU subsidies, have started to operate more like training companies. Nowadays universities in Poland (including state institutions) are also businesses. They offer classical bachelors and masters programmes, free of charge or otherwise, as well as training and post-graduate diplomas which are charged for at commercial rates.

## The Problems with a 'Classical' Education

According to Dr Bonikowska, another problem is the disconnect between the training and education offer within the system of 'classical' school education. This is clearly noticeable in training offers for businesses: "In business, a special role is played by entrepreneurship and entrepreneurs – those who take risks and start a business. There is a substantial set of EU funded training packages exclusively for them. This is fine, but it would be better if such initiatives were additional to the basic knowledge package obtainable in the classical education system – the foundations of our knowledge about the surrounding world."



Dr Bonikowska is conscious of this distance between the needs of the market and current education provision. In common with many other participants in the Effective Education for Employment interview series, she feels that there is too much focus on the acquisition of knowledge and serious lack of focus given to obtaining skills and competencies required by employers.

Secondly, too much attention is paid to completing higher education (obtaining a master's diploma) at all costs, regardless of prospective jobs or individual predispositions. This is because bachelor's degrees did not exist until 1998 and are consequently held in low esteem.

Dr Bonikowska explains that for many Polish families, it is natural for their children to continue their education onto the higher education level; in fact the percentage of Poles who obtain a masters degree is among the highest in Europe. However, because the offer of higher education institutions is ajar with market needs, sometimes a Master's degree requires extra years to learn knowledge which is not necessarily of much use in a work environment.

*Education has to become a complex offer that empowers students (to continuously discover and learn by themselves).*

### **Education vs. Social Policy and Employment**

Dr Bonikowska admits that educational activities subsidised by ESF help socially weaker groups to retain or find work. She also adds that it is particularly important for the Polish Government to develop a uniform vision in respect of unemployment or labour market 'exclusion' resulting from motherhood, diseases, age or the lack of relevant competencies.

Dr Bonikowska points to an insufficient dialogue between ministries that plan how to use ESF funds for the education of Polish citizens with a clear focus on employment opportunities. However, better understanding of employment problems (addressed by the Ministry of Labour) and business issues (handled by the Ministry of Economy) by the Ministry of National Education (responsible for education of the primary and secondary level) can help adapt the education system of young adults to the changing labour market and requirements of employers.

Dr Bonikowska believes that there is a great need to change the traditional 'sectoral' way of government, where ministries plan and execute their actions in isolation, into the mindset enabling exchange of knowledge and experience between individual sectors: "Ministries are their own kingdoms. There are no structures to facilitate planning and implementation of projects shared by numerous ministries. There is an exchange of information, but nothing more."

### **A Lack of Global Perspective**

Dr Bonikowska points out that the poor link between the university education system and job opportunities is clear in the case of foreign language teaching in modern language departments: "Many people in Poland study non-business related fields, such as languages. Not all of them plan to be translators or literature experts. Most of them hope language skills will help them find it easier to get a job. Many of them join the business sector. All of them are aware of this opportunity; however, the curriculum does not prepare them for this. Often after graduation, they need to complement their knowledge in political science, international relations or management. But language studies could well be extended by courses in these fields. This would save them a lot of time and effort."

Conversely, many students have the opposite problem: students of management, international relations or political science have insufficient knowledge of different cultures and not necessarily the best language skills: “Regardless of the field of studies – business of political science – the need of global mindset in higher education is rarely noticed. Courses focusing on different parts of the world have been introduced to European Studies only recently. Students obtain an MA in international relations seeing the world from the perspective of Warsaw.”

According to Dr Bonikowska, EU, Russia and the US are benchmarks for Poland. The rest of the world is non-existent: “We cannot think globally in Poland. We didn’t have colonies or an empire. In the 19th century, when others developed strong state administration, we fought for our independence. After World War II we were behind the “iron curtain.” We paid a high price for independence, sovereignty and joining the rest of Europe; therefore, local problems are still most important for us.”

Dr Bonikowska sees the predominance of this mindset not only in Polish politics, but also in Polish business where very few have sufficient resources and are brave enough to look beyond national borders. Unfortunately, the world has become a global place.

As an EU Member State, Poland has become a part of discussions involving important global issues and has to be able to express its opinion: “Polish politicians have to learn how to see further and wider, and understand other continents, even though they are not well travelled (most of them originate from the former opposition and the “Solidarity” movement). Our current Prime Minister took his first ever trip to China last year and visits India only this year. For this generation, opening to problems of growing Asian powers and changing situations in the international politics and economy are real challenges.”

The consequence of joining the EU is not only the need to be more aware of problems present on other continents, but above all bringing these continents physically closer, which brings other factors to the fore such as migration. Dr Bonikowska notes that, over a short period of time after joining the Schengen area, Poland changed from being a country of emigration into a country of immigration: “We don’t know yet how to handle the growing number of foreigners. Some of them see Poland as a transit country for further immigration. We need to develop a strategy for the Polish migration policy.”

## **The Value of Experience in Education**

Coming back to the analysis of the Polish education system, Dr Bonikowska focuses on the insufficient involvement of practice in teaching. This situation – again a key theme across this research – has a profound effect on the quality of the educational experience as perceived by learners: “Many of those who run their own businesses today have never studied management. On the other hand, many professors who teach business has never worked in industry or run a business. Yet the best effects are brought about by the combination of theory and practice, knowledge and skills. After the course is over you have to take what you know and put it into practice... If you don’t know how, it is as if you knew a language without the ability to speak it.”

Dr Bonikowska argues that today the need to combine theory and practice applies to most fields of classical education. European Studies are an academic field, but she feels that teaching subjects such as mechanisms of European integration and decision-taking in the

EU without practical experience in this respect is defective: "I teach students about the EU funding system and, at the same time, deal with management of financial projects involving these funds. Thus, what I teach is supported by experience and a huge amount of examples. And the knowledge of the system helps me better understand what I am involved in."

### **The Changing role of Teachers**

Dr Bonikowska points to another challenge for the Polish education system – contemporary teaching methods. Their change and adaptation to needs and requirements of learners will be a long and difficult process.

Dr Bonikowska sees new technology and the Internet as the principal stimulants of these changes. The Ministry of National Education is actively trying to convince schools and teachers to introduce changes. Computer labs were set up in most of Polish schools to give students the access to computers and the Internet. The Ministry urges teachers to incorporate ICT and multimedia into teaching; however, it cannot force them to do so: "The will to change has to come from teachers because they are independent in selection of their style and methods. Many of them still teach the old way as it is easier. However, this widens the gap between teachers and students who perfectly know new technologies and Internet resources. Teachers don't have this knowledge and lose authority."

Dr Bonikowska adds that the private sector contributes significantly to information technology programs for schools and teachers. She cites INTEL as an example. INTEL, a world giant in processor production, offers free training for teachers in the use of ICT. About 80 thousand teachers in Poland have participated in such courses. The Scholaris portal created by the Ministry of National Education especially for schools provides teachers with educational content, supporting new ways of teaching based on multimedia methods.

According to Dr Bonikowska, getting the right balance between the classical approach to teaching and innovation requires a conceptual shift in the way teachers think about their role in relation to students: "Nowadays children are very bright, fast and open. They use computers from the age of 4 and will surely be better at it than their teachers. Therefore, teachers become mentors and guides, rather than the source of absolute knowledge. They are there to support skills and show how to strive for proficiency in their practical use. Education has to become a complex offer that empowers students to continuously discover and learn by themselves."

### **Skills, Knowledge and Behaviours for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Summing up reflections on challenges of the Polish education system, Dr Bonikowska sees 4 elements that affect the educational and professional success of contemporary people.

The first element is the need for life-long learning: "We have to understand that life-long education is a permanent thing in our life. We have to be active in this process. The same applies to health care: it's not only about treatment, but also about prevention."

The second element is the ability to select knowledge: "We live in a

world in which we are flooded by information and knowledge from numerous sources. This means that if we do not want to acquire unwanted knowledge, we have to be able to tell the right information from wrong. We have to be able to choose wisely. This, on the other hand, requires a critical view of what we read. The thoughtless copying – so popular among students – is a road to nowhere. We need to learn how to select information and evaluate it in an analytical manner. Particularly because we are left alone in the process; the teacher is not present.”

The third challenge is that of multitasking without a loss in quality of performance for individual tasks. This skill is important both for students and teachers: “Contemporary people are quick and impatient. They are bored by linearity and repeatability. They like creativity and dynamics. They need more stimulants. Therefore, they look for nice and interesting forms of learning and like dynamic multitasking. School should be conducive to learning such skills.”

Dr Bonikowska’s fourth essential for achieving success in the modern world is openness and understating of individuality and diversity. Foreign language skills, awareness of global problems and knowing how to behave in an international environment are essential here.

## **A Vision for Change**

The interview with Dr Bonikowska ends with the vision for how change in the education system can be brought about in Poland.

First of all, individual Ministries tasked with development of their country should start to cooperate more closely together. Teams involving representatives of various Ministries should be strengthened and their work – adequately appreciated: “Changes in the education system should not be decided in the Ministry of National Education, without participation of other ministries, in particular the Ministry of Economy and the Ministry Labour. Only then will the Ministry of National Education bring other viewpoints to teaching – the viewpoint of the employer and the viewpoint of the unemployed.”

Dr Bonikowska states that such horizontal cooperation is not customary in Poland at any level; not only in ministries: “Opinion polls show that our real weakness is that people don’t want to cooperate in general. We are very focused on developing our own skills (human capital), but we are not interested in building the social capital which would involve transfer of knowledge and information and completing tasks together. We are individualists. This is apparent everywhere: in local governments, in politics and even in business where we prefer to run our own company rather than joining forces and creating something bigger.”

Secondly, Dr Bonikowska highlights the importance of introducing thinking on entrepreneurship and inspiring behaviour at primary school level. Greater involvement of business in this process would be of great importance: “This requires more openness of the public sector to the private sector, which the Polish administration is extremely reluctant to do. This has to do with the still prevailing low social esteem for entrepreneurship, with concurrent aspirations for high earnings associated with business.”

Thirdly, work around organisational methods and educational processes at school have to be adapted to contemporary conditions; e-school should become a norm: “This means not only computers and access

to the Internet, but above all changing the method of teaching for all courses from traditional to multimedia, interactive ways, positioning the teacher as the mentor and guide, not the source of knowledge. This means new forms of contacts between the teacher and parents as well as parents and the school.”

According to Dr Bonikowska, the vision of e-schools in Poland requires a “systems” approach: “We can compare it to construction of transport corridors in Poland. A country in the middle of Europe cannot have motorways, but Ireland can. So we have a governmental programme for motorway construction, supported by EU funds. This should be the same with education. E-school cannot be an option out of necessity. The school is the place where we start to discover the world with which we are connected through such motorways.”

# Marlena Falkowska

Head of International Cooperation and Promotion Unit, Centre for Education Development (ORE- Ośrodek Rozwoju Edukacji)

Marlena Falkowska graduated in natural sciences (biology) at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań and, among others, has a post diploma qualification in education management. Her experience of education is international, having also studied at the Institut Supérieur de la Langue Française in Brussels. She has experience at the coal face of education as both a primary school teacher and headmistress. Mrs Falkowska has been dealing with teachers' in-service training since 2003 when she started to work in the National In-Service Training Centre as a consultant teacher and manager of the International Cooperation Team. She worked as the Deputy Director between 2004-2007 and as the Director from 2008 to December 2009. Mrs Falkowska is currently Head of International Cooperation and Promotion Unit, Centre for Education Development, created as a merger of various institutions involved in teacher training and development.



## The National In-Service Training Centre

Mrs Falkowska begins by describing the role of the National In-Service Training Centre, where she worked from 2003 until the creation of the Centre for Education Development; the product of a merger of two educational bodies, the National In-Service Training Centre and the Centre for Pedagogy and Psychology. The National In-Service Training Centre was created with the statutory aim of providing support to education policy in Poland through teacher training with Mrs Falkowska describing its primary role as: "offering 'competency' in respect of developing civic education, citizenship, management. The Centre did not deal with developing teachers' competencies in the area of individual subjects such as mathematics or biology."

## Creative Teaching Techniques

Mrs Falkowska is committed to supporting teachers in their attempts to adopt new teaching methods, and explains that the former National In-Service Training Centre ran and initiated a number of projects with external partners with the aim of promoting more interactive pedagogical approaches.

As an example of the scope of these activities, she describes the 'European School Clubs', a project financed through the Ministry of Education, which she was involved whilst working as a head teacher.

The project involved teachers, students and parents and aimed to increase awareness of EU issues as part of a wider effort aiming at supporting Poland's integration into European structures: "Classes of children were given a different country within the EU to research and become familiar with, research which extended to encouraging students

and their parents to experiment with the culture and cooking the cuisine of their adopted nation. Specific materials were created for these European School Clubs.”

Grant funded, this was a successful project which reached many schools in Poland and was launched to coincide with Polish accession to the EU. Mrs Falkowska tells me: “This project was aimed at empowering teachers with new tools/ways to work with students and was incorporated into the school syllabus for the whole year. We found that involvement in the project brought out creativity in teachers. At the end of the year’s activities, as a part of the “European Day,” each class presented, in various artistic forms, the most important information about their adopted country. Furthermore, with the considerable support of their parents, students arranged stands offering meals they prepared and handed out promotional materials.”

### Challenges around Teacher Training

While such projects demonstrate the considerable effort underway to change educational delivery in Poland, Mrs Falkowska is quick to acknowledge that there are several unresolved issues around teacher training, in particular pre-service training.

Her first concern is that current teacher training does not focus enough on developing teachers’ practical skills and techniques: “The process of change has begun in part as a reaction to the Bologna process, but we have don’t have enough focus on skills, there is not enough balance between theory and practice.”

She sees a new role for teachers, with greater emphasis on the teacher as a coach and mentor as opposed to the person who merely imparts information and knowledge: “A modern teacher should act as a moderator in the process of education. We need to move away from the image of teachers with chalk at a blackboard. Students have many resources at hand in modern day classrooms and it is the teacher’s job to show students the different ways to acquire knowledge, how to cope with different sources, find what is relevant from the large amount of information available.”

Mrs Falkowska sees creating this same competency in teachers as just as vital: “How can you talk about competencies for students if teachers don’t have them?”

### Competencies

Mrs Falkowska sees the issues around developing core competencies as, in part, addressing European integration in Education. She explains that the Polish education system is working towards incorporating the eight core competencies needed by students as laid out in the Lisbon Strategy. Mrs Falkowska highlights two key issues addressed in the context of Polish education, where both teachers and students need instruction in these competencies: “One area we are particularly keen to develop social and civic competencies, as today there is a lack of emphasis in the area of teacher training. Another key competence is communication skills. Skills for negotiation and reaching consensus... these are what we will all need in our adult life. How can we create or teach theses competencies in students, if teachers do not have them themselves?”

/// Children are like flowers, they don’t all blossom on the same day. ///

## Attitudes & Behaviours

Mrs Falkowska is also clear on the main attitudes and behaviours that all school leavers need to develop if they are to compete and thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace. She argues that the acquisition of these attributes is particularly important in the context of Poland's efforts to shift to a knowledge-based economy: "Creativity and flexibility, and the ability to adapt to new situations – these things are so important. We need to help people develop skills in their learning as part of a life long learning perspective. This is tied to initiative, activity (entrepreneurship) – a quality which is vital for people who have to upskill themselves and adapt their current skills to market needs to find or retain a job."

Mrs Falkowska is concerned that historically there has been no explicit requirement for these attitudes and behaviours to be taught in schools, even though many teachers recognise their value.

She sees evidence of change, however, and points out that these attitudes and behaviours are now being enshrined within a new core curriculum. Additionally, Mrs Falkowska has seen the growth of a movement towards tackling these challenges in recent years, in part due to wider European influence: "Last year was the European year of innovation and creativity, and we ran a lot of projects in these fields across Poland. Since the reforms in 1989, Polish schools have changed a lot and many new and innovative forms of teaching have come into Poland. Many teachers are deploying these new methods, not only because they are forced by the new curriculum to do so. The latest change has introduced the obligation to complete certain elements of the curriculum using the project method."

Mrs Falkowska believes that although these developments are positive, a strong commitment to appropriate teacher training and increased support in schools is needed to ensure these new approaches deliver much needed change.

## The Status of Teachers

We now move onto the tricky subject of attracting the right candidates to go on to become the new breed of teachers Poland's classrooms evidently need. As with other interviewees in our research in Poland, the problems of status and low salary in the teaching profession are highlighted: "In Poland, salary levels come nowhere near matching the expectations of the brightest and best – our teachers, as compared to their peers in other EU states, have low salaries. The situation is now a little better than it was, but when both partners in a family are teachers, it is difficult to survive financially. My husband always used to say to me, you can be a teacher because I'm not, so we can afford it."

She illustrates the contrast of teachers' status in Poland with other European countries by pointing to an educational policy in Finland where teachers get both good salaries and a comprehensive package of other benefits that support their professional development e.g. annual scientific leaves, well-organised in-service training system; an ideal scenario according to Mrs Falkowska: "In Finland teaching jobs attract top candidates because the authorities are aware that only the right policy in this respect makes the teacher's profession competitive as compared to other jobs. Therefore, to make it attractive and ensure the best achievements, they have to have something to offer."

Despite the barriers to finding good teacher trainees, Mrs Falkowska

acknowledges that thousands of existing teachers are proactive in seeking out ways of improving their own teaching, and often willing to develop new skills and tools – something that bodes extremely well for the future of the Polish education system.

### **Developing a Long-term Vision for Education**

When discussing the gaps between the needs of employers and the skills and capacities of those leaving the education system, Mrs Falkowska explains that the concept of inviting employers to participate in education design is a new one in Poland. However, she sees business and industry as key partners in developing future educational policy if the needs of the economy are to be met: “We should prepare students for labour market requirements. It is easier to encourage students to learn skills that will be used rather than those that won’t. Poland needs a long-term vision for what we in Poland want to achieve in education, in educating children.”

She continues, explaining that a single, coherent vision for education is imperative if the needs of learners, employers and the country as a whole are to be adequately addressed: “Development of such a vision is hampered by the fact there are presently two Ministries of Education in Poland (The Ministry of Education and the separate Ministry of Higher Education). Now there are two Ministries of Education and decisions, launching of projects affecting both take longer. Different visions do not work together in education; you need one consistent, universal vision.”

While Mrs Falkowska is convinced of the need for a shared, long-term vision for education in Poland, she is careful to point out that this vision should be divorced, as much as possible, from politics. Echoing the sentiments of Witold Wozniak, another interviewee in this series, she would like this vision formulated and monitored by an independent group. For her, “education should be a-political”.

She is concerned that without this autonomy, political allegiances could influence policy decisions, citing the case of an Education Minister who wanted to change the core values taught at schools to those championed by his party.

### **Describing the Ideal Experience of Education**

Having outlined how this vision should be developed, I ask Mrs Falkowska to describe what, for her, constitutes the ideal experience of education. She begins by arguing that a child’s pre-school experience is fundamental – a position adopted by child development experts the world over: “Education should start from when a child is born. The first two or three years are crucial to a child’s education. That time spent at home is the first stage of education.”

She then moves to a concept of what she calls the socialization of children: “We need to provide opportunities for children to socialize by sending them to kindergarten... It is important they get this contact with other children in a group setting.”

Mrs Falkowska explains that many children have not had the chance to attend pre-school in Poland, a situation that is apparently starting to change. She sees providing this opportunity to all children as part of a drive for more equal opportunities in education – one of her main objectives – regardless of age, geography or other factors that divide such opportunity within the country.

## A Call for Personalised, Life-Long Learning

Mrs Falkowska is convinced of the value of developing a culture of personalised learning, and believes that everybody should be encouraged to take responsibility for his or her own programme of life-long learning, both in and outside of formal or informal education.

She states that curriculums should be flexible enough to allow for adaptation to individual learners' interests, capabilities and learning styles, including the time span or speed of the didactic process.

To reinforce this point, she uses an intriguing analogy drawn from her background as a biologist: "Children are like flowers, they don't all blossom on the same day."

Returning to her professional interest in the development of appropriately skilled teachers, she reiterates how important the changing role of the teacher is in delivering her vision for the future: "A teacher should be a mentor and a school is only as good as its teachers. Even if you equip a classroom with all the technology in the world it must still be moderated by the teacher. In the teaching process, teachers need to apply modern methods, have the ability to motivate students to create new ideas, form their willingness to research something, and kindle the real passion for learning. If you look back on your own life I'm sure you can find a teacher who inspired you. A teacher with a capital T!"

Drawing our interview to a close, Mrs Falkowska describes the final part of her vision for education in Poland, underlining the absolute importance of linking learning to the real world and calling for employers and educators to work together to achieve this goal: "Students must feel that what they are learning is practical. We need schools where students learn things they can use in real life; what future employers will expect from them. Why do people take driving courses? Because they want to learn how to drive a car, develop a practical skill they will be able to actually use. Education should not be something you do to gain a degree or diploma. This is the moment where employers and educators must meet and work together."

# Sylvia Waśniewska

Deputy Director of Economic Development Department, Ministry of Economy



In her role as Deputy Director, Sylvia Waśniewska is charged with the preparation and monitoring of medium-term strategies and programs of economic development in the fields of competition, innovation, and entrepreneurship. Her remit also includes duties involving the driving of cooperation between labour markets and the education and training sector. She is passionate about promoting education for innovation and creativity, and believes that greater openness and self-reliance in young people can be developed by integrating more practical exercises, simulations and real-life projects into the education system.

## Core Qualities in Employees

Ms Waśniewska begins our conversation by providing a personal perspective on what she sees as the key qualities employees need to succeed in the modern workplace; a subject area she has spent much of her professional career considering. Her conclusions are based on her own extensive experience of senior management roles in both the private and public sector: "I can tell you what I value (in an employee)... The basic thing is intelligence, but what is really important is readiness and an enthusiasm to learn. I prefer a person who doesn't know but wants to learn, than a person who knows but doesn't want to learn."

She stresses the importance of identifying this in potential employees, arguing that if the right attitude is in place, good management can develop the requisite skills: "If an individual is enthusiastic, willing to learn, I can form an excellent worker from this type of person."

## Independent Thinking – The Path to New Ideas

Additionally, Ms Waśniewska states that the ability to think independently is crucial and interestingly, she argues that this capacity can be taught. In the work setting, Ms Waśniewska explicitly tries to develop independent thinking in her teams and employees, arguing that the ability to think laterally and exercise a degree of autonomy is invaluable in a dynamic and complex workplace: "I want them (my staff) to see the big picture, be able to operate on their own and not simply want to be directed. They need to think one, two, three steps ahead – then they can come up with new ideas. I love people who come to me and say 'I can see a way that we can do things differently'."

Ms Waśniewska actively promotes this type of behaviour in her staff at the Ministry, explaining that she has plans to develop a system whereby all staff are encouraged to submit an idea for a change or improvement: "This is my way of motivating them, fighting a working culture of acceptance or boredom...However, there is still room for discussion around how we incentivise this process, whether to connect it with benefits or not."

Furthermore, Ms Waśniewska is quick to stress that developing new ideas is beneficial both for the employer and for the employees; she is convinced that supporting these qualities increases job satisfaction among employees as much as it increases the productivity of her Department: “I want them to be happy... if someone comes up with an idea that creates something between us, generates enthusiasm. This is not theoretical – it is a practical way of improving the quality of life at work.”

## Teaching Creativity

Ms Waśniewska goes on to argue that innovation and creativity, far from being innate, can and should be taught in schools. Whilst acknowledging the complexities around assessment in this area, she is convinced that with the right teaching methods in place, these critical competencies can be developed: “This is something you can and should learn – absolutely... Can you assess (creativity)? Maybe not with percentages, but I think you can teach teachers to teach creativity, innovation, and the capacity to think.”

When explaining how this could work in practice, Ms Waśniewska states that in order to encourage creativity in the classroom, teachers must adopt and promote curiosity and independent thinking: “Teachers should reward children who are showing a capacity to think for themselves; there is no such thing as a stupid question.”

*During the Communist era, nobody was expected to think innovatively.*

## Competition and the Need for Innovation

When exploring the socio political context of nurturing creativity and innovation in Poland, Ms Waśniewska explains that there is an important historical context to consider: “During the Communist era, nobody was expected to think innovatively – independent thinking was considered ideologically dangerous. This explains why some people from older generations are missing the wider, global perspective. Older people who grew up in the communist system probably have much bigger problems with innovative thinking.”

In spite of her evident capacities in terms of generating new ideas, Ms Waśniewska was forced to learn quickly in terms of thinking innovatively in her professional career: “Things came easy to me at school – I was a good student – but nobody expected me to think innovatively. But as soon as I started work, I was expected and incentivised to be innovative – there were clear career benefits for being so.”

This state of affairs, she points out, is even more the case with young people entering the job market and increasingly fierce competition for positions and promotion.

## The Disjoint Between Education and Employment

We then move on to discuss one of the key themes of the Effective Education for Employment research study – the mismatch between what students are taught and the demands of modern economies.

Ms Waśniewska’s first observation is that school curriculums should avoid being overly theoretical and have as practical a focus as possible: “If you are just taught to remember facts, with no link to the real world, you don’t learn - you forget. This is lost knowledge.”

She believes this excessively abstract emphasis continues throughout the education system, and states that her own experience of higher education mirrors this significant problem: "I studied under a number of well known Professors at the Warsaw School of Economics and I forgot most of the knowledge I gained the minute I finished my exams... I feel that too much of the time I spent at University was spent learning abstract knowledge, for example learning statistics without any link to real application of that knowledge."

Ms Waśniewska goes on to explain that anecdotal evidence collected from friends and colleagues suggests that competition in the classroom and a strong emphasis on examinations and testing has led to a reduction in the experience for many children in Poland.

Additionally, she believes that the stringent demands of the national curriculum prohibit opportunities for learning outside of the classroom, limiting the value of formal education for many learners – a sentiment echoed by many teachers and experts in the UK.

On a positive note, Ms Waśniewska notices a new attitude to educational research emerging – one that is attempting to address the gap between education and the world of work: "Structural links between what we teach (at higher level) and what the economy needs are not effective enough. We are working on changing this, but it may take 10 years or more to achieve."

She explains that reform of the education system is now underway, in part as a response to the Lisbon Agenda (the blueprint for economic development in the EU), in particular the imperative to move towards a knowledge economy. An example of this can be seen in the way academic research in universities is funded, with those projects that can evidence market needs and projects that lead directly to commercial opportunities being most likely to receive funding: "There are many more educational research programs supported at national level that are based around the changing needs of the marketplace... This new approach is brought about by a process of reform – 5 or 6 new Parliamentary Acts on Higher Education, trying to establish links between areas such as scientific research and the market."

Ms Waśniewska believes that such initiatives are to be applauded and may herald a more productive approach to Ministries working together to address strategic economic issues.

### **The Big Challenge – Learning to Learn**

Ms Waśniewska is adamant that the main challenge faced by Poland's policy makers is designing a system that can: "...develop open, brave people who are motivated and interested in learning."

She is convinced that this process begins in the first years of a child's life, and argues that parents have a responsibility in terms of teaching these qualities to their children: "The great percentage of responsibility lies with parents. You cannot assume that teachers or schools will do this... We have many good teachers in Poland but effective education requires parents taking a bigger role in their children's education, so I should assume that I need to nurture and protect the innovative potential of my children."

She is concerned that for many parents, their desire to give their children the best possible education translates into a belief that schools should maximise classroom time. She believes that what children really need is

more education outside of the school environment, a chance to play and access to different types of stimulus to learn.

To this end, she feels that parents need to become more aware of their responsibilities in terms of developing curiosity, independent thinking and creativity, and believes firmly that it is the role of Government to launch initiatives to advise and support parents in this respect.

### **Imagining the Ideal Experience of Education**

At this point I ask Ms Waśniewska to provide her personal vision of the ideal educational experience. She lays out a clear set of points for change:

1. Shorter lessons in the first two years of children's academic life: "All the research shows that young children can only focus for a short period of time... perhaps 15 or a maximum of 30 minutes..."
2. Relate knowledge to the real world and avoid too much detail – help learners make connections between what they learn and life: "There's too much deep detail... I'm not sure little children need to learn the structure of DNA... They may need to start early if they want to go to medical school, but early specialisation can be difficult."
3. Teach children to be open-minded and never punish independent thinking.
4. Ensure that children are taught in a way that supports their physical needs – smaller groups of children in classes and more chances for sports and other physical activity.
5. Improve the status and quality of teaching: "We need to choose the best people to become teachers, but how can you do that with the low salaries teachers are paid?"

### **Education – A Personal Perspective**

Ms Waśniewska concludes our interview by reflecting on her own experience of education, stating the importance of creating a stimulating and supportive environment, and – ideally – one tailored to the individual needs of children and young people.

An obviously talented and hugely dynamic woman, I ask how Ms Waśniewska's own education has contributed to her success. She outlines how at primary level, her education was not as good as it could have been. She feels that as an intelligent child for whom learning came easily she needed more encouragement to develop her learning independently and develop her interests. She does acknowledge however, that education has improved with the introduction of the new political system in Poland.

In stark contrast, her move to an excellent secondary school, where she felt among geniuses, spurred her on to focus on learning, and she successfully graduated from one of the best universities for the study of Economics in Poland.

Importantly, however, this academic achievement came with a cost, as she believes the demands of the school system and a lack of personalised education restricted her from developing the critical and creative thinking processes that were to prove so useful in later life.

Echoing her previous points about the overly theoretical emphasis of formal education, Ms Waśniewska states that these restrictions also continued at university: "I spent five years at university and I think I wasted much of that time. There were some very interesting classes, some brilliant teachers and Professors such as Prof. Leszek Balcerowicz, Prof. Karol Lutkowski and Prof. Mieczysław Puławski, but most of what I learnt was abstract. I blame the system, but also some teachers, who did not care about making their subject interesting for me."

So in many ways Ms Waśniewska puts her achievements in school and beyond down to a her ambition and curiosity – attributes that may have been nurtured by her parents as much if not more than her experience at school.

In conclusion, Ms Waśniewska suggests that delivering a more personalised experience will unlock the potential of more children; a challenge that education systems around the world are grappling with every day: "I wouldn't say the education system got the best of me. We need small classes, individual treatment... and a lot of sports! This would be pretty close to ideal for me."

# Witold Wozniak

Deputy Director, National Centre for the Support of Vocational and Continuing Education (KOWEziU)

The National Centre for the Support of Vocational and Continuing Education works under the Ministry of Education and deals with improvement of vocational education of teachers and compiling examples of vocational curricula, including module curricula and educational packages. The organisation also runs vocational guidance programmes to help students choose the right educational career path to support their future plans. In his role as Deputy Director, Witold Wozniak oversees the implementation of KOWEziU programmes.

## Challenges for Vocational Training in 2010

Witold Wozniak begins our interview by giving his view of the main challenges facing vocational education and training in Poland in 2010.

He laments the low prestige associated with vocational education in Poland, explaining that for many, vocational education is seen as a poor substitute for a more traditional route; an option students choose when they think they are unable to successfully complete a more academic education: "We have to deal with something called negative choice – this is when students believe they cannot apply for academic education."

This pervasive negative perception, however, stands in stark contrast to the demand for highly skilled Polish workers in foreign countries; workers who have earned a reputation for being highly trained, competent and motivated.

The main challenge he identifies relates to what Mr Wozniak believes is an excessive formality with regard to the way in which vocational education is delivered. He explains: "The system is based in schools and colleges... there is no mobility and flexibility within the system which means it's very difficult to educate employability skills and behaviours in students."

## Employability: Skills & Behaviours

When discussing the skills, knowledge and behaviours contemporary students need to survive and thrive in the modern workplace, Mr Wozniak is very clear about the most important skill or attribute the 21<sup>st</sup> century learner needs: "The ability to learn coupled with a behavioural readiness to learn is most important."

Moving onto a discussion of the attributes that employers rate as critical, Mr Wozniak states that his dialogue with employers has enabled him to isolate a set of key attitudes and behaviours that are expected of employees in Poland: "These are: honesty, accountability – which is very difficult to measure – creativity and inventiveness... which I consider to



be a national characteristic in Poland! You can see this in the success of our workers when they go abroad...”

### **Education for Entrepreneurship**

Similarly, Mr Wozniak believes that the economic and employment hardships the Polish have endured have led to a general entrepreneurial mindset: “We had to be innovative and creative to make a living... entrepreneurship is in our genes.”

He notes that the development of these type of skills is also woven into many educational disciplines in Poland, both at a theoretical level and through practical learning experiences.

He describes school projects where, as part of an economics or business studies courses, students create and run virtual companies through online simulations, even occasionally setting up commercial partnerships with real businesses: “We even have students who have created companies that go on to become successful... In Polish (the language) entrepreneurship is not a skill but an attitude – a sensibility.”

*/// We don't yet have one shared vision for education in Poland. ///*

### **Measuring Attitudes & Behaviours**

Moving onto the challenges around measurement of attributes and soft skills, Mr Wozniak argues that formally assessing attitudes and behaviours is problematic.

He also points out that developing specific attitudes and behaviours in students is difficult, but explains that this has not deterred people from attempting to do so in Poland. Citing a study carried out by the Polish Institute for Education Research, Mr Wozniak details how expert researchers investigating the labour market have tried to develop tools to measure attitudes and behaviours but were ultimately unsuccessful.

In spite of these challenges, he believes that an educator can influence attitudes and behaviours but that in so doing will always come up against the effects of internal factors associated with the individual, such as their personal ethics or morality, as well as external factors such as the wider environment in which that individual lives.

Furthermore, Mr Wozniak points out that while a school may be able to successfully influence attitudes and behaviours in students whilst they are in the education system, this does not necessarily mean that these qualities will be retained when a student subsequently enters the workplace: “What a person does is always going to be influenced by what's going on around them – external factors play a significant role. Schools describe values – honesty, accountability and so on – as required, but this doesn't guarantee that a student will live by these once they leave school.”

### **Bringing Business Skills into the Classroom**

When discussing the value of integrating real-world experience into the education experience, Mr Wozniak goes on to explain how he believes those with business or industry backgrounds can be brought into the classroom.

He points to the recently amended Education System Act, which allows expert practitioners to teach in vocational schools and colleges even if they have not trained as teachers. As well as giving students valuable insights into the practical (as opposed to just theoretical) elements of various jobs, this arrangement also provides an opportunity for education to be more closely aligned with the needs of the workplace and the wider labour market.

However, whilst believing this to be an extremely positive development, Mr Wozniak does have a number of reservations about the implementation of this new approach: "This change has only been brought in over the last year, and many industry specialists are reluctant to accept a teacher's rate of pay... I am also aware that many of these highly skilled experts many not have the pedagogical skills required to get their message across and become effective teachers."

He then outlines another solution to bridge the gap between education and work – the introduction of internship programmes for teachers to allow them to reconnect with industry and keep up to date with any changes and advances.

A pilot programme which allows teachers in vocational fields to spend some time "in the field" as he puts it has already been run in Poland, but the number of applicants was unfortunately low, which he believes was the result of the way in which it was promoted.

## **Building Consensus**

Mr Wozniak then touches on a common cause of concern in the Polish education community: the lack of a shared vision for education in Poland: "We don't yet have one shared vision for education in Poland. A group of experts from the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Higher Education and other ministries have been working for some time on the joint vision: "The Lifelong Learning Strategy", but the document is not yet ready."

He describes the problem as not only in joining several Ministries in a shared vision, but also designing ways to implement "The Lifelong Learning Strategy", and introducing mechanisms to support cooperation and then define a common baseline for formal, non-formal and informal education.

Furthermore, he believes that a new paradigm for education should be conceived; one that is not designed around formal institutions, but based on learning outcomes: "We need to base education on results, on assessment of an individual's skills and competencies not just on process or formation... whether they are learning in or outside the classroom."

## **A Vision for Vocational Education in Poland**

This brings us to the question of how Mr Wozniak himself would tackle the challenges of vocational education in Poland. I ask him to elaborate a personal vision.

The first facet of his vision is the development of what he describes as a learning outcomes approach, with an emphasis on personal life-long learning rather than individuals acquiring knowledge only through traditional formal education.

To illustrate this, he highlights the large number of experts working in the constantly changing IT sector who often don't have any formal education but have acquired – and continue to acquire – hugely valuable skills.

Following on from this example, Mr Wozniak is adamant that a way has to be found to evaluate and assess competencies that professionals develop through their working life. A life-long learning approach to education, he stresses should include: "... Ongoing validation of results of non-formal and informal learning, which does not exclude those who don't have the formal education associated with specific competences."

He explains that at present, education regulations only allow people who have gone through formal education to take professional examinations: "This is a real barrier to people who cannot get a certificate for the skills they have acquired. As an example, we have an employee here at the centre who has been with us for 8 years, and his skills – which have developed and evolved in that time – are exceptional. We wouldn't swap him for anyone."

### **Learning without Barriers**

Mr Wozniak concludes our discussion by explaining his passion for the concept of 'open source learning', where individuals have open access to learning materials online in learning communities and can further develop their skills through sharing information and collaboration.

He stresses that a key part of this vision is about ensuring autonomy and independence of educational processes and the examination system, concurrently providing a reliable external evaluation system to guarantee benefits for all stakeholders.

As an example, he points to cases in the past of political interference in education where pass thresholds for exams were lowered in order to obtain a favourable set of figures.

To illustrate the importance of this independence, Mr Wozniak uses the analogy of taking a driving test in Poland, explaining that after completing driving lessons with one school, individuals have to take a test in front of an independent body, ensuring a fair and properly benchmarked assessment of the learner's capabilities.

We end the interview with Mr Wozniak summarizing his simple vision for the Poland's education system: "There are a growing number of validation projects, often funded by the European Social Fund, to evaluate and confirm learning outcomes derived from informal and non-formal education. My vision is of independent, autonomous systems of learning with an independent examination system... This is what we need."

# Witold Jurek

Undersecretary of State, Ministry of Science and Higher Education  
(MNiSW)

Please note: This interview was conducted by e-mail.

## Core characteristics employers look for irrespective of role/sector

**Q. Are there core characteristics that all new entrants to the workplace should have?**

**A.** There are such characteristics and a good educational system needs to foster them.

**Q. How would you describe these characteristics? e.g. soft skills/employability/skills/attitudes/behaviours.**

**A.** One set of core characteristics is a reflection of the constant and rapid change that is a feature of today's labour market. It includes adaptability to a changing environment and readiness to undergo training to upgrade or expand one's skills. Another set of core characteristics is related to the modern workplace and includes ICT literacy, teamwork and problem-solving skills as well as self-reliance – to name just a few.

**Q. How can these competencies be measured?**

**A.** Unlike hard skills, the characteristics mentioned above are not easy to measure. It is more feasible to evaluate the progress made against the backdrop of a baseline of soft skills, once personal development targets have been set. The assessment should enable employees to recognise the skills they already possess and identify their own capacity for learning.

**Q. How can these competencies be further developed/upgraded through continuous/life-long learning programmes?**

**A.** Such competencies can well be developed as part of life-long learning programmes. The educational system is well positioned to play a fundamental role in this regard. At every level of education a certain amount of time could be devoted to building skills of this kind. This should be, and in many cases is, complemented by employer- and state-provided training opportunities for adults.

## The role of business and industry in designing education

**Q. What role can/should employers play in the development of education and training?**

**A.** Employers can play a vital role in enhancing the alignment between the skills of graduates and the needs of the economy. Where appropriate, they should be involved in shaping curricula



for vocational schools and universities and participate in teaching activities. They should also be invited to have a say in evaluating outcomes of vocational education and development of quality assurance systems.

**Q. Do professional development programmes adequately contribute to the formation of ideal employees?**

A. Professional development programmes may aim to contribute to the formation of better employees ("ideal" seems too ambitious a goal), but their actual outcomes will vary depending on the design of those programmes. The more successful programmes are likely to have followed a considerable effort to adjust their content to the needs and profiles of the beneficiaries.

**Q. Can you give any examples of high performing employees – what characteristics do they have and how did they attain these?**

A. High-performing employees typically have a number of features in common, including strong motivation, willingness to pursue additional training opportunities, or excellent time-management and communication skills.

**Q. What responsibility does the individual have in their own personal development?**

A. It is ultimately up to the individual to be in charge of his or her personal development. However, the immediate social environment of a person also plays a role, particularly early on. It is vital for that environment, mainly the parents and teachers, to identify and nurture any creative endowment exhibited by a pupil or student.

*High-performing employees typically have a number of features in common.*

**What in your view is the ideal experience of education?**

**Q. What does the school environment look like?**

A. The ideal school environment should, first and foremost, recognise and develop pupils' innate talents. It should inspire curiosity on the one hand, and scepticism towards common but unsubstantiated views on the other hand. It should also encourage independent thinking, rather than submitting to established authorities.

**Q. What teaching methods are used?**

A. Hands-on, interactive experience should be used whenever possible, involving open discussions and a free exchange of ideas. Committing minor details or formulae to memory should be de-emphasised.

**Q. What kind of knowledge, skills and behaviours are prioritised?**

A. The main principles underlying each major area of study should be a vital topic, as well as soft skills that come in handy when functioning in a local community or in a work team. In vocational education, the input of industry should be taken into account.

**Q. What other characteristics would you add?**

A. Teacher – pupil/student relations should be based on mutual respect and on a sense of partnership.

## The role of education systems

**Q. Are employers' needs clearly articulated and reflected in existing educational programmes?**

**How are the Polish Ministry of National Education and Ministry of Science and Higher Education working together to respond to employers' needs?**

**What are the challenges facing policy makers in Poland looking to improve the design and delivery of vocational education and training programmes?**

**What are the challenges facing educators/training providers in delivering appropriate education for employment programmes?**

**What is the perceived value of qualifications provided by educational institutions – how important is certification in terms of evaluating the skills, attributes and behaviours of the ideal employee?**

In October 2009 the Polish Government adopted the Guidelines for the amendment of the Acts – Law on higher education and the Act on Academic Degrees and Title and on Degrees and Title in Art. These reforms introduce the following changes in terms of adjusting higher education provisions to labour market needs:

**A. Possibility of providing degree programmes in close cooperation with employers and the involvement of practitioners representing economic organizations in the teaching process in vocational education by a) creation of curricula, b) participation in teaching, c) defining and evaluating learning outcomes;**

Developing forms of education orientated to labour market needs, among others, by commissioning fields of studies in compliance with the current trends in the economy;

Elaboration of a National Qualifications Framework and defining the curricula on the basis of learning outcomes;

Obligatory monitoring of graduates' career paths by higher education institutions and introduction of this requirement as a criterion in the quality assessment procedure;

Obligatory collegial bodies (convents) in state vocational higher education institutions which will include, among others, representatives of municipal authorities and the business sector. They are aimed at building a link between HEIs and the socio-economic environment. They will be responsible for adopting the HEIs development strategy in accordance with a national and regional development policy, as well as for adopting the rules for monitoring the process of strategy implementation;

Introduction of new criteria to the quality assurance process, measuring the level of linkage between higher education programmes and the needs of the economy.

## Impact of Education on Economic Development

- Q. Poland was the only EU country to register positive growth in 2009. Has education reform contributed to this relative success?**
- A. Education reform may have contributed somewhat to positive growth in Poland last year. This issue has not been studied, therefore any definitive assessment would now be premature.
- Q. What new demands do the effort within Poland to build a larger knowledge economy place upon education systems?**
- A. The educational system in Poland needs to be more responsive to the needs of the economy. As indicated above, this objective will hopefully be met through the reform of higher education. Polish HEIs also need to become more competitive so as to attract the best talent from abroad and to prevent young Polish academics and researchers from seeking employment in other countries. The reform contains measures designed to accomplish just that.
- Q. How is education helping to foster innovation and entrepreneurship in Poland?**
- A. The Act on higher education currently in force provided the legal basis for the establishment of academic business incubators and technology transfer centres. Academic business incubators may be created to support the economic activity of the academic community, including entrepreneurial students, whereas a technology transfer centre is usually set up to sell or provide, on a free-of-charge basis, the results of research and development work to the business sector. There are many such entities at Polish higher education institutions, contributing to enhanced innovativeness of our economy and strengthening an entrepreneurial spirit in the academic community.



