Compulsory Education

Until the 1990s, there was only one form of compulsory education: full-time compulsory education in the 8-year primary school. The 1997 Constitution of the Republic of Poland introduced part-time compulsory education. Within the framework of the school education reform implemented from September 1999, the duration of full-time compulsory education was extended by one year as part of a new structure establishing a 6-year primary school and a 3-year lower secondary school. As from September 2004, one-year compulsory preschool preparatory classes were introduced for 6-year-old children. As from September 2011, such preparatory classes were compulsory for 5-year-olds. Moreover, the primary school entry age was lower for a few years: for the first half of the 6-year-old cohort as from September 2014, and for the entire 6-year-old cohort as from September 2015. However, since December 2015, the school entry age has been raised again to 7 years.

In accordance with the Law on School Education, as of 1 September 2017, full-time compulsory education is now again provided by the 8-year primary school (szkoła podstawowa), single structure education covering ISCED 1 and 2, and young people pursue part-time compulsory education in public and non-public post-primary schools or in the form of vocational training at an employer’s organisation. The reform of the school system is being implemented in accordance with the Act of 14 December 2016, the Provisions introducing the Law on School Education. Lower secondary schools were phased out by 31 August 2019.

Currently, compulsory education is divided into:

- **one-year compulsory preschool preparation**;
- **full-time compulsory education** (requirement to attend school) which starts at the beginning of the school year in the calendar year when the child reaches the age of 7 and lasts until the completion of education in the primary school, but not beyond the age of 18;
- **part-time compulsory education**, until the age of 18, which young people may receive, in particular, in a post-primary school or as part of vocational training at an employer’s organisation.

Moreover, children and young people can participate in compulsory education in nursery schools or schools abroad and at foreign diplomatic missions in Poland. A student who has completed education in a post-primary school (earlier: a school above the lower secondary level) before reaching the age of 18 can also fulfil the requirement to pursue part-time compulsory education by taking courses at a higher education institution (HEI).

The structure of the school education system

In accordance with the School Education Act of 7 September 1991 (with further amendments), the
The school education system comprises nursery schools (przedszkole) and other preschool education settings, primary schools (szkoła podstawowa) (single structure education covering ISCED 1 and 2), post-primary schools (in the new school system; earlier: schools above the lower secondary level) and art schools. Higher education institutions are not included and form a separate higher education system. The school education system also comprises colleges of social work classified at the ISCED 5B level for international comparisons (and until 1 October 2016 comprised teacher training colleges and foreign language teacher training colleges, referred to as initial teacher training institutions).

For a diagram presenting the Polish education system, see the Eurydice publication “The Structure of the European Education Systems 2019/2020: schematic diagrams [1].”

In addition to the above-mentioned schools, the school education system includes:

- education and care institutions where children and young people can develop their interests and talents and participate in various leisure and free time activities;
- continuing education centres, practical training centres and further training and in-service training centres where learners can acquire and broaden general knowledge, and vocational or professional skills and qualifications;
- art institutions: fine art centres which develop artistic interests and talents;
- counselling and guidance centres (referred to as psychological and educational support centres), including specialised services, which provide counselling (pedagogical and psychological support) to children, young people, parents and teachers, and guidance to children in the choice of the area of study or occupation;
- youth care centres, youth social-therapy centres, special schooling and education centres, special educational centres for children and young people requiring special organisation of education, methods of work and education; and centres providing compulsory education to children and young people with severe intellectual disabilities and intellectual disabilities combined with multiple physical disabilities;
- institutions providing care and education to pupils receiving education away from their home;
- in-service teacher training institutions;
- educational resources centres.

Preschool education is offered to children at the age of 3 and above. As of the school year 2004/2005, all 6-year old children were required to attend a nursery school (przedszkole) or a pre-school class (oddział przedszkolny) in a primary school as the School Education Act introduced a one-year compulsory preschool preparation. This requirement applied to 5-year old children as of September 2011 and has applied again to 6-year-olds since 2015.

Between the school years 1999/2000 and 2016/2017, children between the ages of 7 and 13 attended a 6-year primary school (szkoła podstawowa). As of 1 September 2017, the Polish Parliament has re-established an 8-year primary school (previously existing until 2000). As from the school year 2017/2018, pupils finishing grade VI of the pre-reform primary school continue education in grades VII and VIII of the new 8-year primary school. Currently, primary education is divided into two stages: the first stage (grades I to III) offering integrated early school education, and the second stage (grades IV to VIII) providing subject-based education. Between 2002 and 2015, at the end of the 6-year primary school, pupils took an obligatory external test, set by the Regional Examination Boards and assessed by examiners selected by the Boards. The external test, which was designed to provide information (and was not, strictly speaking, an examination, and had no impact on further education), has now been abolished by amendments to the legislation. However, as of the school year 2018/2019, all pupils in grade VIII of the primary school take the external eighth-grader exam.

Until the school year 1999/2000, pupils finishing the 8-year primary school could continue their
education in a 4-year general upper secondary school (*liceum ogólnościenne*), 4 or 5-year technical upper secondary school (*technikum zawodowe*), 4-year technical upper secondary school (*liceum techniczne*), vocational upper secondary school (*liceum zawodowe*) or 3-year basic vocational school (*zasadnicza szkoła zawodowa*). At the end of education in the first four types of school, students could take the maturity exam (*egzamin dojrzałości*) which opened access to higher education. Those who did not pass the exam or were not admitted to a higher education institution could continue their education in post-secondary schools offering programmes of 1 to 2/2.5-years’ duration. Students finishing a basic vocational school entered the labour market with qualifications of skilled workers (*robotnik wykwalifikowany*).

Following the first reform of the school system, from 1999/2000 (based on the Law of 8 January 1999), all pupils who finished the primary school continued their education in the 3-year lower secondary school (*gimnazjum*). At the end of lower secondary education, students took a compulsory external exam organised by the Regional Examination Boards. According to the original aims of the reform, students completing lower secondary education were expected to choose between two options: a 3-year specialised upper secondary school (*liceum profilowane*) leading to the maturity exam (*egzamin maturalny*) or a 2-year basic vocational school (*zasadnicza szkoła zawodowa*).

Ultimately, the School Education Act provided lower secondary school graduates with the following options to continue education:

- a 3-year basic vocational school (*zasadnicza szkoła zawodowa*) which led to a diploma conferring vocational qualifications to students who passed exams confirming vocational qualifications in a given occupation, and which also opened the way to further education in Grade II of a general upper secondary school for adults;
- a 3-year general upper secondary school (*liceum ogólnoształtne*) which led to the maturity certificate (*świadectwo dojrzałości*) upon passing the maturity exam (*egzamin maturalny*);
- a 4-year technical upper secondary school (*technikum*) which led to a diploma conferring vocational qualifications to students who passed exams confirming vocational qualifications in a given occupation and, optionally, to the maturity certificate upon passing the maturity exam;
- a post-secondary school (*szkoła politechna*) for upper secondary school graduates, offering programmes of a maximum 2.5 years’ duration, which led to a diploma conferring vocational qualifications to students who passed exams confirming vocational qualifications in a given occupation;
- a 3-year special school which prepared students with moderate and severe intellectual disabilities and students with multiple disabilities for employment.

The maturity exam is an external exam which has replaced entrance examinations at higher education institutions. The School Education Act introduced the external maturity exam in the spring of 2005. More information in Polish on the external examination system can be found on the website of Central Examination Board [2].

The ongoing reform of the school system, initiated in December 2016, re-introduces some of the principles underlying the school system before 1999. When it is fully implemented, the structure of the Polish school education system will comprise the following types of schools:

- **8-year primary school** (single structure education covering ISCED 1 and 2): compulsory for all pupils;
- **Post-primary** (secondary and post-secondary) **schools**, including:
  - 4-year **general secondary schools**;
  - 5-year **technical secondary schools**;
  - 3-year **stage I sectoral vocational schools**;
3-year special schools preparing for employment;
2-year stage II sectoral vocational schools (where students finishing a 3-year stage I sectoral vocational school can continue education);
post-secondary schools with programmes of up to 2.5 years for those who have completed secondary or sectoral vocational secondary education.

The school system which is now being put in place provides for two external examinations: the eighth-grader exam and the maturity exam. The functions of these exams do not change as compared to the lower secondary school exam and the maturity exam in the pre-reform system.

See the updated information at: Poland: National Reforms in School Education [3].

Home-based education

The Law on School Education of 14 December 2016 (Article 37) states that children can participate in one-year compulsory preschool preparation, full-time and part-time compulsory education outside of an educational institution, that is, at home where they are taught by their parents. Home-based education as a form of full- or part-time compulsory education can be provided based on a permit from the head of the relevant educational institution (nursery school, primary or post-primary school). A permit is issued at the parents’ request. Such a request should be submitted together with an opinion / statement from a public counselling and guidance centre; a statement from the parents confirming that they will provide conditions for the child to follow the national core curriculum for a given education stage; and a statement where the parents undertake that the child will take so-called annual qualifying exams in each school year. Qualifying exams are conducted by the school whose head gave the permission for the child to participate in full- or part-time compulsory education outside of school. The legislation does not specify any qualifications that parents or other individuals involved in home-based education should hold.

The Law on School Education also states that pupils / students participating in full- or part-time compulsory education outside of school receive end-of-year marks based on results of end-of-year qualifying exams which cover a relevant part of the core curriculum, as agreed with the school head for a given school year. Pupils / students do not receive a mark for conduct. Schools offer support to pupils / students participating in home-based full- or part-time compulsory education and their parents: they can participate in after-class activities, classes / activities developing abilities and interests, rehabilitation classes / activities, and career guidance activities. They also have access to textbooks, educational resources, exercise materials and teaching and learning aids available in a given school (where this is agreed with its head), and can seek advice of school staff to prepare for end-of-year qualifying exams. The home-based education arrangement for full- or part-time compulsory education can be terminated at the parents’ request; in the case of the pupil’s / student’s unexcused absence from end-of-year qualifying exams or failure to pass them; or in case a permit for home-based education was issued in contravention of the law.

The structure of the higher education system

In terms of the types and levels of programmes, higher education is divided into:

- **specialist programmes**: fee-based programmes of at least 3 semesters, provided by public and non-public higher education institutions. A curriculum for a specialist programme sets out learning outcomes which integrate universal first-degree descriptors as defined in the Integrated Qualifications System. It includes classes / activities developing practical skills.
- **first-cycle programmes**: undergraduate programmes for applicants holding the maturity
certificate, which provide knowledge and skills in a specific area of study and prepare for work in a specific profession, leading to a Bachelor's degree (licencjat or inżynier);  

- **second-cycle programmes**: graduate programmes for applicants holding a Bachelor’s (licencjat or inżynier) degree, which provide specialist knowledge in a specific area of study and prepare for creative work in a specific profession, leading to a Master’s degree (magister) or an equivalent degree; second-cycle graduates may apply for admission to third-cycle programmes;  

- **long-cycle programmes**: graduate programmes for applicants holding the maturity certificate, which provide specialist knowledge in a specific area of study and prepare for creative work in a profession, leading to a Master’s degree (magister) or an equivalent degree; long-cycle graduates may apply for admission to third-cycle programmes;  

- **third-cycle programmes**: doctoral programmes open to applicants holding a Master’s or equivalent degree, which provide advanced knowledge in a specific area or discipline of science, and prepare for independent and creative research and for the award of a doctoral degree (doktor);  

- **non-degree post-graduate programmes**: programmes for holders of a higher education diploma / degree.

Specialist programmes are offered at ISCED 5 level Programmes leading to a Bachelor’s degree (licencjat or inżynier), and a Master’s degree (magister) or an equivalent degree are classified at ISCED 6 and 7 levels. Third-cycle / doctoral programmes are offered at ISCED 8 level.

Colleges of social work are classified in Poland at ISCED 5 level and are not included in the higher education system (they are part of the school education system).

With regard to their founding bodies, HEIs are divided into:

- **public institutions**, established by the State, as represented by the competent authority or public administration body; and  

- **non-public institutions**, established by natural persons or legal persons other than a legal entity administered by national or local authorities.

In organisational terms, they are divided into:

- **university-type institutions** (uczelnia akademicka) which conduct research activity and have been awarded research grade / category A+, A or B+ in at least 1 discipline of science or fine arts; and  

- **non-university institutions** (uczelnia zawodowa) which offer programmes responding to the needs of the socio-economic environment and do not fulfil the criteria for a university-type HEI.

There are several specific types of HEIs which are supervised in some areas of their activity by ministers other than the minister responsible for higher education and science:

- a military higher education institution: a public HEI supervised by the Minister of National Defence;  

- a government service higher education institution: a public HEI supervised by the minister responsible for home affairs;  

- a higher education for art studies: a public HEI supervised by the minister responsible for culture and national heritage;  

- a medical higher education institution: a public HEI supervised by the minister responsible for health;  

- a higher education institution for maritime studies: a public HEI supervised by the minister responsible for maritime economy.
HEIs may use the following names:

- ‘academy’ (*academia*): the term reserved for a university-type HEI;
- ‘university’ (*uniwersytet*): the term reserved for a university-type HEI which has been awarded research category / grade A+, A or B+ in at least 6 scientific or artistic disciplines (hereafter referred to as ‘disciplines’) which fall within the scope of at least 3 areas of science or fine arts;
- ‘technical university’ / ‘university of technology’ (*politechnika*): the term reserved for a university-type HEI which has been awarded research category / grade A+, A or B+ in at least 2 disciplines of engineering and technology sciences.

With regard to the mode of study (referred to as ‘form of study’) and the organisation of higher education, programmes are divided into:

- **a full-time programme**: a programme where at least half of the ECTS credits covered by a curriculum are earned as part of classes / activities directly involving academic teachers or other staff conducting classes / activities and students;
- **a part-time programme**: a programme identified in a resolution of the HEI senate where less than half of the ECTS credits covered by a curriculum can be earned with direct involvement of academic teachers or other staff conducting classes / activities and students.

With regard to their orientation (‘profile’), programmes are divided into:

- **practically oriented programmes** where more than 50% of the ECTS credits is allocated to courses / classes developing practical skills; and
- **academically oriented programmes** where more than 50% of the ECTS credits is allocated to courses / classes related to scientific research conducted by a given HEI.

Additionally, HEIs may provide educational services which involve the validation of learning outcomes. This is a formal process verifying the learning outcomes achieved through structured learning within an institutional framework outside the higher education system, or through unstructured learning outside an institutional framework, using ways and methods enhancing the body of knowledge, skills and social competences.

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