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System of educating journalists in Poland.

Student opinions and expectations

KEY WORDS

journalism studies, educating standards

ABSTRACT

The article is a synthetic report of representative empirical research which took place in nine Polish higher education schools, all of which were granted the right to run master's degree journalism studies. The article presents evaluation of obligatory educating standards for journalism and social communication. The evaluation was made by people directly involved – the students of the specialization, and it also includes their expectations and postulates for change. The aim was to create a starting point for a discussion on raising education quality standards in the area of journalism and social communication studies all around Poland.

Journalist education in Poland has never been so differentiated and on such a massive scale before. According to various estimates, there are as many as between 20 000–40 000 people studying journalism and social communication as well as other media related specializations part of other faculties (philology, political science) every year. This means that there are several to several dozen thousand alumni graduating every year with diplomas in these fields. Within a short time, journalism has become an extremely popular field of study, attractive to young people for various reasons. Journalism and social communication have become incredibly versatile fields of study, enabling higher education institutions the choice of various diversified paths of education as far as content and specialization. As we know, people with diplomas in these fields can also become press secretaries, PR managers, copywriters, advertising and marketing specialists, graphic designers, photographers, website designers, multimedia specialists, etc. Because these fields are so broad, different schools are pursuing their own various paths of education, often unrelated to binding standards of education and resulting in lower quality of education. The State Accreditation Committee (PKA) has outlined various disquieting examples of such and it strongly suggests taking action to increase the quality of education. The need to enforce change has been noticed not

just by PKA but also and predominantly by academics working in these fields, media experts, lecturers and students themselves.

Among the most popular postulates arrived at as a result of various discussions on the subject is a reform of education standards in these fields. Janusz Adamowski in his report for the PKA points to the necessity for change, “It is an imperative and urgent matter to improve the existing education standards in journalism and social communication, especially regarding their adaptability to the specificity of the fields (today, they seem to have too much political science character) and so that they are more cohesive (lacking it today) and internal logic, especially regarding master degree studies”¹.

The specified problems related to journalism and social communication, observation of journalist education systems in other countries and the need to empirically verify opinions of those interested in the subject have led authors of the research project *Educating journalists in Poland. New needs – new standards*², carried out under the supervision of the author of this article, to draw up a diagnosis of needs and expectations of academic circles and a method for realizing them. This diagnosis is to inspire discussion on raising education standards in the fields of journalism and social communication on a national scale. Presented here is a synthetic report of representative empirical research which took place in nine Polish higher education schools, all of which were granted the right to run masters’ degree studies in journalism and social communication. It presents evaluation of obligatory education standards by people directly involved – the students themselves. The article also includes student expectations and postulates for change³.

Research methodology

The research, carried out in order to find out student opinions on the effectiveness and usefulness of existing education standards in the fields of journalism and social communication and to collect their suggestions regarding raising the quality of education, was performed in the second quarter of 2009. The research method used was field research using a survey, with a questionnaire with standardized questions. Included in it were all higher

¹ J. Adamowski, *Raport podsumowujący ocenę jakości kształcenia na kierunku „dziennikarstwo i komunikacja społeczna”*, [in:] *Działalność Państwowej Komisji Akredytacyjnej w 2007 roku*, Warszawa 2008, p. 19.

² The project, under the supervision of Sławomir Gawroński, was carried out by academics at Wyższa Szkoła Informatyki i Zarządzania in Rzeszów, with support from Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway, via subsidies from European Economic Area Financial Mechanism and Norway’s Financial Mechanism part of the Education and Internship Fund.

³ For more see: *Kształcenie dziennikarzy w Polsce. Opinie i oczekiwania studentów*. Aut. S. Gawroński et al., Rzeszów 2009.

education schools with rights (by the Minister of Higher Education) to run master's degree studies in journalism and social communication which included Warsaw University, Łódź University, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, Wyższa Szkoła Informatyki i Zarządzania in Rzeszów, Wrocław University, Jagiellonian University, Dolnośląska Szkoła Wyższa in Wrocław, Wyższa Szkoła Zarządzania „Edukacja” in Wrocław, Wyższa Szkoła Umiejętności Społecznych in Poznań. From each school, randomly chosen were students of first, second and third year (bachelor level) and students of first and second year master degree studies, proportionally to the number of students in each year. It is difficult to assess the level of representativeness for the chosen research sample due to that fact that student populations constantly change and are difficult to precisely estimate (they change within one school semester or year). Despite these difficulties, extrapolation of received results is possible and justified by the quality of the sample. Its size seems sufficient in view of the estimated number of general population

The research sample upon which carried out was statistical analysis, after verification of empirical material, included 1440 students. The structure of respondents, divided according to the school they attend, including numbers and as percentage of total, is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Respondent structure, by school (N=1440)

| Higher education school | Number | % |
|--|---------------|----------|
| Warsaw University | 196 | 13.9 |
| Wyższa Szkoła Informatyki i Zarządzania in Rzeszów | 179 | 12.6 |
| Wrocław University | 174 | 12.0 |
| Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin | 162 | 11.2 |
| Dolnośląska Szkoła Wyższa in Wrocław | 161 | 11.1 |
| Jagiellonian University | 161 | 11.1 |
| Wyższa Szkoła Umiejętności Społecznych in Poznań | 159 | 11.0 |
| Wyższa Szkoła Zarządzania „Edukacja” in Wrocław | 125 | 8.6 |
| Łódź University | 123 | 8.5 |

Content of education assessment

Student expectations analysis in relation to the model of educating journalists and social communication specialists is based on two categories of factors. Firstly, assessed were actually existing models of education in this sphere, standardized for all higher education schools with these fields of studies. Secondly, measured was student assessment regarding desirable content, form and skills beyond the set standards.

The standards of education for journalism and social communication require over 900 hours of classes, which make up 42.85% of minimum number of hours necessary to obtain a bachelor level diploma. As far as master's degree programmes, it is 405 out of 1000 hours of classes. As a result, institutions have the possibility to diversify their education offer (for example regarding specializations, the introduction of particular classes, given the staff and infrastructure and individualization of education) and to influence roughly about 57% of bachelor level programme of studies and 59.5% of master level studies. It means that education standards have a large influence on what is taught and the quality of education obtained. The classes offered as well as their assessment according to students enabled us to create a ranking of desirable and unattractive content. It is related to student perception of its future usefulness in their professional work, the duties they will have to perform and their future plans. Usefulness was measured and classified according to answers *rather useful* or *very useful*. Taking that into consideration, a ranking was created illustrating the level of usefulness of different types of classes from the point of view of surveyed students. The results are included in tables 2 and 3.

Table 2. Ranking of desirable content part of education standards, as perceived by surveyed bachelor level students (N – different in each line)

| Content | Percentage of those surveyed, assessing content as useful (in %)* |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Journalist workshop | 93.5 |
| Media law | 89.4 |
| Public relations | 88.8 |
| Language culture | 88.1 |
| Journalist ethics | 86.2 |
| Law | 84.3 |
| Journalist genres | 84.0 |
| Journalist information sources | 82.2 |
| Communication studies | 81.1 |

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|--------------------------------|------|
| Polish media system | 77.4 |
| Rhetoric and eristic | 77.3 |
| Media systems around the world | 76.0 |
| Sociology | 74.3 |
| Modern political systems | 73.8 |
| 20th century history of Poland | 61.3 |
| Economy | 57.0 |
| Philosophy | 28.9 |
| Media history | 21.7 |

*Percentages do not sum up to 100. The surveyed were to assess each content group separately.

When analysing the data collected, it is worth noting that the large majority of classes (content) included in education standards for journalism and social communication is positively rated by students. As was expected, most practical are considered to be general journalist workshops skills, affirmatively assessed by 93.5% of those surveyed. Other highly rated classes were also strictly tied to practical skills (language culture, journalist genres, journalist information sources). Quite surprising were high results of classes related to journalistic responsibility (law, media law) and journalist ethics. Discussions in academic circles and outside of them regarding modern journalism standards frequently point out a general sharp decrease in the quality of media broadcasts and journalist reports. Journalists are accused of excessive searching for sensation, unscrupulous obtaining of information, lack of moral values and breaking of ethical codes. Meanwhile, the results of research show that ethical aspects of journalistic work are considered highly useful by future journalists. The presented results also show content considered not so useful in the professional world – philosophy and media history were chosen by the least amount of students surveyed. Both subjects are theoretical rather than practical, hence the relatively low rating among students who tend to favour practical content and value its usefulness in the future.

Table 3. Ranking of desirable content part of education standards, as perceived by surveyed master level students (N – different in each line)

| Content | Percentage of those surveyed, assessing content as useful (in %)* |
|---------------------------|--|
| Marketing and advertising | 84.0 |
| Copyright law | 82.3 |
| Public opinion | 76.8 |

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|---|------|
| Social psychology | 74.8 |
| International and intercultural communication | 72.2 |
| Language pragmatics | 69.7 |
| Mass communication theory | 69.5 |
| Local and community media | 69.3 |
| Media's social and cultural influence | 66.6 |
| International relations | 66.6 |
| Media discourse analysis | 60.2 |
| Media studies research methods | 55.3 |
| Media economics | 48.1 |
| 20th & 21st century Polish and international culture trends | 48.1 |

* Percentages do not sum up to 100. The surveyed were to assess each content group separately.

As far as standard education content for master level students of journalism and social communication, the majority was also positively rated by students regarding its usefulness in the professional world. In case of master degree classes, which are less focused on practical training, most desirable was content which is more practical and refers to the sphere of marketing communication. Next, similar to bachelor level student results, the surveyed also chose legal matters (copyright law) as very helpful as well as subjects or issues related to media influence on recipients (social psychology, public opinion). What is interesting, typical media content was rated lower than expected (media discourse analysis, media's social and cultural influence, language pragmatics). All in all, only two subjects were considered not useful by the majority of students; media economics and 20th and 21st century Polish and international culture trends received the lowest ratings of all, marked by 48.1% of those surveyed.

Fascinating from the point of view of content usefulness part of education standards for journalism and social communication, was the creation of a ranking of "unwanted" or "useless" subjects, those marked by students as "rather useless" and "entirely useless" in their future professional life. It is difficult to assess what percentage of negative marks should qualify a subject for elimination from future curriculum, however the presented below "negative" rankings of subjects, presented in table 4 (bachelor level) and table 5 (master level), give us a fuller picture for a more complex assessment of the usefulness of different areas of study.

Table 4. Ranking of content part of education standards, negatively perceived by surveyed bachelor level students (N – different in each line)

| Content | Percentage of those surveyed, assessing content as useless (in %)* |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Philosophy | 59.8 |
| Media history | 59.0 |
| Economics | 35.1 |
| 20th century history of Poland | 22.2 |
| Sociology | 22.0 |
| Modern political systems | 11.9 |
| Rhetoric and eristic | 11.1 |
| Communication studies | 11.0 |
| Media systems around the world | 9.3 |
| Polish media systems | 8.6 |
| Journalist genre | 7.6 |
| Journalist sources of information | 7.3 |
| Journalist ethics | 7.2 |
| Law | 7.2 |
| Language culture | 5.2 |
| Public relations | 3.9 |
| Media law | 3.0 |
| Journalist workshop | 2.7 |

* Percentages do not sum up to 100. The surveyed were to assess each content group separately.

Data included in table 4 corresponds to those from table 2. Subjects considered least useful from a professional point of view are philosophy and media history. Others high on the list of uselessness were also economics, 20th century history of Poland and sociology.

Table 5. Ranking of content part of education standards, negatively perceived by surveyed master level students (N – different in each line)

| Content | Percentage of those surveyed, assessing content as useless (in %)* |
|---|---|
| Media studies research methods | 28.0 |
| Media economics | 26.2 |
| 20th & 21st century Polish and international culture trends | 25.3 |
| Media discourse analysis | 18.9 |
| Mass communication theory | 16.4 |
| International relations | 16.2 |
| Local and community media | 15.2 |
| Language pragmatics | 14.3 |
| International and international communication | 13.5 |

| | |
|---------------------------------------|------|
| Media's social and cultural influence | 11.1 |
| Social psychology | 10.8 |
| Public opinion | 8.7 |
| Marketing and advertising | 7.7 |
| Copyright law | 7.5 |

* Percentages do not sum up to 100. The surveyed were to assess each content group separately.

As far as content delineated in standards of education for master level students of journalism and social communication, most useless considered were “media studies research methods”, according to 28% of master students surveyed. Also high on the list were “media economics” and “20th and 21st century Polish and international culture trends”.

Assessment of practical education

In order to find out student opinions on the practical side of education in the fields of journalism and social communication, they were asked to assess the proportions of practical to theoretical classes. In accordance with expectations, a large majority of respondents is of the opinion that there is too much theory and too little practical training in the programmes of studies. Even though standards of education require a considerable amount of practical training, there is still a predominant amount of theory over practice. Education standards regulate only part of the programme of studies and higher education institutions have a fair amount of freedom in planning the curriculum for those fields, in the amount of 1100 hours for bachelor degree studies and 595 hours for master level. It seems, though, from student opinions that this part of the programme is also largely devoted to theoretical content. Generally, students do not differentiate between the two parts (what is imposed by standards and what is chosen by the school) and they assess the proportions on the whole. We can infer that overall institutions tend to prefer the easier and cheaper alternative, choosing academic subjects of theoretical character instead of taking advantage of the freedom and offering practical courses, which would fit in more with student expectations.

More detailed information regarding student opinions on practical subjects is presented in table 6. The data shows that as many as 79.3% of respondents is of the opinion that there is too much theory, with 42% stating that there is “definitely” too much theory offered and 37.3% – “rather” too much. People who were happy with the existing proportions make up 19.5% of total respondents, while the rest thought that there is too little theory (only 17 people or a little over 1%).

Table 6. Opinions regarding the proportions between theoretical and practical course in the fields of journalism and social communication (N=1421)

| How do you assess the proportions of theoretical to practical courses in the field journalism and social communication? | Number | % |
|--|---------------|----------|
| Definitely too much theory | 597 | 42.0 |
| Rather too much theory and too little practice | 530 | 37.3 |
| Proportions are appropriate | 277 | 19.5 |
| Rather too little theory and too much practice | 15 | 1.1 |
| Definitely too little theory and too much practice | 2 | 0.1 |

As far as the above answers, there were few differences noted between bachelor and master degree students. A larger percentage (47.2%) of master level students is of the opinion that there is too much theory in the programmes while 40.6% of bachelor level students marked the same answers. This is probably because master degree programmes of studies include more theory than bachelor level ones.

Practical courses and practical training outside the school in the field of journalism and social communication are carried out in order for students to obtain concrete skills useful in their future professional life. Regarding specific skills marked by students as most practical, in first place mentioned was the ability to write articles (54.9%), then – public speaking skills (52.5%) and preparation of promotion tools (45.9%). More detailed information on answers provided regarding desirable practical skills is included in table 7.

Table 7. Opinions regarding desirable practical skills obtained during studies (N=1410)

| What practical skills would you like to learn during studies? | Number | %* |
|--|---------------|-----------|
| Writing articles | 774 | 54.9 |
| Public speaking skills | 740 | 52.5 |
| Preparation of promotion tools | 647 | 45.9 |
| Collection of research materials for journalistic publications | 588 | 41.7 |
| Preparation of graphic materials for media purposes | 535 | 37.9 |
| Other practical skills | 64 | 4.5 |

*Percentages do not sum up to 100 since respondents could choose more than 1 answer.

Among the surveyed, 64 people (4.5%) marked “other” practical skills which they would like to acquire as part of journalism or social communication studies. As far as the responses chosen, popular were also photography and people/organization image creation.

Suggestions regarding changes in education system

In addition to content assessment of existing education standards, respondents were asked to put forward suggestions for interesting new courses which would improve the programme offer. Answers about content which institutions lack in their programmes reflect student expectations as far as desirable subjects and skills in terms of their interests and future professional work. Again, among the answers provided, the majority regarded an insufficient amount of practical courses. The analysis of responses, presented in table 8, shows respondent interest in obtaining knowledge necessary in the professional world.

Table 8. Suggested content and courses which higher education schools lack in their programmes of studies for journalism and social communication (N=414)

| What kind of content/courses are not present in programmes of studies for journalism and social communication? | Number | %* |
|---|---------------|-----------|
| Practical courses | 185 | 44.7 |
| Photography courses | 71 | 17.1 |
| Audio and video editing courses | 62 | 15.0 |
| Multimedia and graphic courses | 48 | 11.6 |
| Voice projection and diction | 39 | 9.4 |
| More foreign language classes | 36 | 8.7 |
| More public relations classes | 36 | 8.7 |
| Music journalism | 34 | 8.2 |
| Psychology of negotiation | 29 | 7.0 |
| More advertising classes | 19 | 4.6 |
| Interpersonal communication | 17 | 4.1 |
| Reporting | 14 | 3.4 |
| Editing | 14 | 3.4 |
| Film and literary criticism | 13 | 3.1 |
| Creative writing | 11 | 2.7 |
| Non-verbal communication | 11 | 2.7 |
| Self-presentation | 11 | 2.7 |
| Others | 79 | 19.1 |

* Percentages do not sum up to 100 since respondents could choose up to 5 answers.

The option “others” was chosen 79 people (19%), part of which suggested were the following options: copywriting, branding, media planning, lobbying, sport journalism, investigative journalism, civic journalism, web design, information management and neuro-linguistic programming

The analysis of suggestions provided in the above table does not take into account classes already offered as part of programmes of studies (with the exception of cases in which the respondents chose a larger amount of specific classes, ie. more advertising classes) as well as answers “don’t know” and “nothing is lacking”. It should be noted that several respondents (master degree students), aside from suggestions included in table 8, pointed out other significant shortcomings in standards of education. They negatively assessed the fact that there is no foreign language part of the programme (master level) and that there are not enough practical courses in comparison to theory (bachelor level).

Graduation

For some time now, going on in Polish academic circles is a discussion on the possibility of changing the present way of finishing studies. Among various suggestions, discussed is whether it would be advantageous to do away with dissertation papers (on the bachelor and master levels) and their defenses. Naturally, there are voices for such a solution, a liberalization of the system, as well as those against it and for implementing even stricter criteria. It should be noted that most frequently expressed are opinions about doing away with thesis papers for bachelor degree studies. Among arguments for is the fact that these studies are more practical/vocational in character and that dissertation papers produced are of lower quality and generally not academic in character. Suggested are some alternatives to take effect instead of the existing system:

- diploma obtained based on passing a practical exam (or assessment of practical achievements);
- diploma obtained based on a final exam assessing knowledge acquired throughout studies;
- diploma obtained based on passing several exams in subjects essential to the given field of study.

Students taking part in the research were asked to assess the following four alternatives for obtaining a graduation diploma by answering these questions:

- should students have to defend their thesis papers in order to obtain a diploma?;
- should students have to pass several exams assessing the level of acquired knowledge in order to obtain a diploma?;
- should students have to pass one exam assessing the level of acquired knowledge in order to obtain a diploma?;
- should students have to pass a practical exam in order to obtain a diploma?

Respondents had the option to individually assess each option, treated separately. This kind of approach allowed for a reliable assessment of the proposed solution. It also allowed respondents to articulate their opinions even if they were in favour of more than one solution. As far as results, a large majority of those surveyed were of the opinion that it is best to maintain the *status quo*, that is to require a thesis paper and its defense. In total, 82% chose this option while only 12.3% is for reforming the system and doing away with dissertation papers.

A significant amount, 57.3%, was for the option of obtaining a diploma based on the results of a practical exam (or assessment of practical achievements). However, 23.9% was against this solution, thinking that it is not a good idea. Also, a large percentage (18.8%) could not assess this idea and was undecided.

Somewhat less popular was the idea of obtaining a diploma based on passing several final exams in essential to the field of study subjects, assessing the level of acquired knowledge throughout studies; 44% thought it was a good idea, 13% definitely thought so but 40.8% were against.

The least support gained the option of obtaining a diploma based on passing one final exam, assessing the level of acquired knowledge throughout studies. Only 10.7% was definitely for, 25.3% chose “rather for” and 43% was against.

A continuation of the issue discussed in this article, enabling comparison of results obtained as part of empirical research carried out, is a study assessing the quality of education in the fields of journalism and social communication performed by academics⁴. Thanks to a comparison of opinions expressed by students and academics, supplemented by opinions of journalist studies experts, a proposal was put forward for improving the system of educating

⁴ See: *Kształcenie dziennikarzy w Polsce. Opinie i oczekiwania środowiska naukowo-dydaktycznego*. Aut. S. Gawroński et al., Rzeszów 2009.

future journalists and social communications experts⁵. The main goal of authors of the project *Educating journalists in Poland. New needs – new standards* was to create a starting point for a discussion in academic circles on the quality of journalist education in Poland as well as to point out the necessity for change in the system and the direction for such reform, based on results of empirical research carried out.

⁵ See: S. Gawroński, R. Polak, *Dziennikarstwo i komunikacja społeczna – nowe wyzwania. Kierunki zmian w kształceniu w zakresie dziennikarstwa i komunikacji społecznej*, Kraków 2010