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The quality of education in higher education (a perspective of an organisational game)

Abstract

The quality of education in higher education concerns both the process of education and higher education as a good produced as a result of education processes. In the last several dozen years, the quality of education has become a major issue dealt with as part of public policy in the area of higher education both in the dimension of particular countries participating in the Bologna Process, and in the European Higher Education Area. Social sciences have shown more interest in education processes in higher education, with managing the quality of education becoming one of the ideas central to the matter.

The research approach proposed in this article refers to the organisational game concept and draws on the assumptions and the notional apparatus of the so-called decision-making approach as regards making public decisions. A particular assumption that has been made is that the activity of entities involved in the process of education and performing different roles therein can be described and explained as decisions of players playing multiplayer and multilevel games for the organisation of education processes and for higher education. Games for education processes and for higher education are currently played not only in the hierarchical structure, but also in a broader organisational perspective, which is the European Higher Education Area. Managing the quality of education in this area is not controlled top-down, and involves mainly arranging some binding and guiding institutional solutions which are to lead to an increased competitiveness of education processes and higher education offered by European higher education institutions.

Keywords: higher education, education process, quality of education, education quality management, accreditation, organisational game

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Problem overview

The quality of education belongs to a set of key concepts serving both the description of the condition of higher education and the justification for changes in this condition. Understanding of quality, which is the semantic core of this concept and refers primarily to the processes of exchange of goods, is also used today to describe and justify changes in various organisational structures of social life.² The quality of a good incorporated into the processes of social exchange can be defined as the appropriateness of such a good in relation to the society's need to have such a good. The goods assessed in terms of their quality are primarily products understood as goods or services.³ A *sui generis* product is also education, including education produced and delivered by higher education institutions. The quality of a product in a market economy society (including the assessments of product quality as better/worse – in a situation where there is a market of specific goods or services and the quality of products serving similar needs is compared) is determined by the market mechanisms of balancing the demand and supply. The quality of education as a specific product is determined by a wide variety of factors, with the assessment of quality of education not being governed by a simple market philosophy due to the

² In contemporary organisational culture, ensuring the quality of a given organisation is treated as both an external requirement (designated by appropriate public authorities) and an internal one (resulting from the desire to improve the functioning of a given organisation). A third, institutional way of quality assurance is also possible: to conduct an external audit by an independent auditing institution (a national or international one) that has the competence to certify internal quality assurance mechanisms in the examined organisation. A widespread international quality management system in organisations is the ISO (International Organisation for Standardisation) system, which has existed since 1987 and been continuously improved (most recently in 2015), accepted by many state-owned standardisation and quality assurance institutions (www.iso.org).

³ Source literature indicates difficulties in clearly defining quality and points to the multifaceted nature of the concept of quality. It is a notion that can be used in the description of various social processes and various organisational forms of social life. In the ISO 9001 quality standard, quality is defined as a set of features and properties of goods/services to satisfy socially justified, existing or anticipated needs. For more about the ambiguity of the term of "quality" in relation to the education process and the possible institutional systems for ensuring the quality of education, see e.g. I.M. Bleikle, M. Kogan, *Organization and Governance of Universities*, "Higher Education Quarterly" 2007, 20, in particular p. 479–484; I Austin, G.A. Jones, *Governance of Higher Education. Global Perspectives, Theories and Practices*, 2nd ed., New York 2017, pp. 94–123, 169–174; E. Reale, G. Marini, *The Transformative Power of Evaluation*, [in:] I. M. Bleikle, J. Enders, B. Lepori (eds.), *Managing Universities. Policy and Organizational Change from a Western Perspective*, Palgrave Macmillan 2017, pp. 107–137.

particular significance of the good of education and the complex nature of the process of education leading to this good.⁴

The development of organisations based on power relations and interfering in the functioning of market mechanisms (including especially states as organisations based on an appropriate mechanism of political power) has led to significant changes in the social mechanisms for determining the quality of products. In particular, state and supranational decision-making centres with bureaucratic structures of political power and management (including EU Member States and EU bodies) have institutional opportunities to exert impact on organisations that produce and provide certain socially desirable products and on the assurance of the quality of both products themselves and of the processes of their manufacturing.

The last few decades of the development of countries have been marked by the formation of institutions for monitoring and assessment of the quality of products of special social importance, as well as by the emergence of organisational structures oriented at the production and supply of the said products. These institutions are supposed to be the basis for managing the quality of the product delivered by a given organisation and for managing the quality of operation of such an organisation. This also applies to higher education and education as a product produced and delivered to recipients, as well as to education processes leading to the acquisition of this product. It is significant that determining the quality of many products and the quality of operation of many organisational structures takes place currently in the conditions of globalisation. This results in an understandable emphasis on the creation of regional (for example, European) or even global institutions and procedures for comparing the quality of the same products produced in individual

⁴ The assurance of adequacy of education and education processes in relation to the goal of ensuring the acquisition of knowledge, social skills, and competencies required for full participation of graduates of various levels of education to the needs of the changing labour market as well as the development of civil (participatory) democracy is stressed in the notions of quality accepted throughout the international community. There are also components of quality of education: properly prepared and motivated students, competent teachers providing education on the basis of education curriculums appropriate to its level, as well as sound and effective management of the education system, leading to a justified allocation of funds earmarked as part of public funds. Ensuring the quality of education is not – and must not be – a task limited to education institutions; it is also a public task that requires implementing appropriate public policies in the sphere of education, adopting appropriate statutory solutions, and a proper distribution of funds necessary for the provision of education, as well as appropriate tools for measuring the effects of the education process (see e.g. *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005*, www.unesco.org/education/gmr_download/chapter1.pdf (accessed: 2.07.2018); *Defining Quality in Education 2000*, www.unicef.org/education/files/Quality_Education.pdf (17.07.2018). Similar goals and components of the quality of education have been adopted by the countries of the British Community (www.thecommonwealth-educationhub.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Quality-in-Education-Standards-Draft-V1-2.pdf (2.08.2018)).

countries (including education) and for comparing the quality of operation of institutions providing similar products (including education processes). In consequence, the development of appropriate, commonly accepted quality management/quality assurance standards is becoming a widespread trend. These standards are developed by the decision-making centres of individual states or their associations (for example, by European Union bodies and institutions). International institutions that aspire to set universal standards of product quality and procedures for managing the processes of their production and delivery to recipients have also emerged. This is the nature of the abovementioned standards that form an extensive system of product quality assurance and quality management standards, based on ISO 9001-2015. Regardless of the opportunities for implementing the ISO certification procedure for managing the quality of education, the institutions that were of primary importance for higher education were national institutions for the evaluation of the quality of education, and now these are national and international accreditation agencies.⁵

The body of literature presenting the results of research on the management of the quality of education in various systems of higher education is growing at a very fast rate. The suggested research approaches are very diverse, being mostly based on analytical studies of individual elements of the institutional structure of higher education and education processes, with higher education itself being presented as a special organisational structure within a state (and in Europe also as a network of higher education institutions and their scientific activity and education, jointly forming the European Higher Education Area – EHEA).⁶ The research on the quality of education in European higher education institutions is the subject of interest in

⁵ This is the nature of the abovementioned standards that form an extensive system of product manufacturing quality assurance and quality management standards, based on ISO 9001-2015. As should be emphasised, it is voluntary to undergo the ISO certification procedure. The decision on whether to do so is left to the higher education institution. In contrast to this procedure, subordinating to national institutions to ensure the quality of education is a legal obligation, but legal regulations may allow the selection of an appropriate mechanism for evaluation of the education process and its results, as well as the selection of an accreditation institution from a list of authorised accreditation institutions.

⁶ The starting point for the establishment of the EHEA was the agreement of states participating in the Bologna Process on the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) in 2001. All countries participating in the process joined the agreement (currently 47 European countries and over twenty other countries, including the USA, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Japan and China), committing themselves to complying with recommendations resulting from reports developed as part of the network. These recommendations included European standards and guidelines on internal quality assurance systems addressed to European higher education institutions and on the establishment of national institutions for external monitoring and evaluation of the quality of education in higher education institutions. The establishment of the EHEA was announced in 2010.

many social sciences, including the theory of organisation and management, sciences studying public policies, and legal sciences. Therefore, it is an interdisciplinary subject of research that requires cooperation between representatives of many social sciences, and one of the basic research issues in this situation is the selection of appropriate research approaches and concepts that make it possible to assess the complexity of quality management in higher education as part of the organisational and institutional structure of a state and, simultaneously, an autonomous organisation with a complex internal structure while taking into account the conditions resulting from the functioning of universities in the EHEA.

The possibilities to describe and explain the phenomena and processes covered by the general formula of quality assurance and quality education management are to a large extent dependent on the choice of an appropriate research approach. Contemporary social sciences offer many concepts and approaches that can be used to study quality management processes in higher education. The assumptions and theses of the classical theory of organisation, especially the assumptions and theses derived from the theory of bureaucracy by M. Weber, have been used so far in studies on public policies and public administration. It should be pointed out that Weber's theory has still a strong power of describing and explaining empirical phenomena and processes within the hierarchical structures of both public authorities and higher education as a public policy area, in particular for public decision-making centres (state and local government authorities). These are the very same reasons that make managerialism still attractive for management practice in higher education. Legal sciences are dominated by a normative approach based on striving after a model presentation of higher education as a system of binding norms and legal institutions. Neoclassical concepts of management are also offered in the theory of organisation, and they are based on an analysis of the relationship between the needs and interests of various entities (stakeholders) involved in the public policy adopted in the area of higher education, and seeking to control higher education institutions to satisfy their interests.⁷

All of the concepts and research approaches presented above refer – to a lesser or greater extent – to the essence of systemic examination of organisational structures, based on the assumptions of specific relations between a system and its social setting. These assumptions justify the shape of the bureaucratic structure of a given organisation as well as the mechanisms of operation of such an organisation. The

⁷ Cf. an overview of these concepts and approaches: I Austin, G.A. Jones, op. cit., passim. For applications of some of these concepts, see K. Manning, *Organizational Theory in Higher Education. Core Concepts in Higher Education*, London 2013, passim; K.W. Alexander, K. Alexander, *Higher Education Law. Policy and Perspectives*, 2nd ed., London 2017, passim.

approach to the management of the quality of education suggested in the article as a sort of organisational game also refers to certain assumptions and theses of systemic examination of social phenomena and processes. Some of the theses also coincide with the concept of the New Public Management in the area of public administration or economic analysis of bureaucratic structures and law. What distinguishes the organisational game concept when compared to the abovementioned concepts is the full empowerment of all parties in management relations as players, and at the same time an indication of organisational limitations in their behaviours in the management process, as well as the dependence of one player's gains on the behaviours of other players. For this reason, an organisational game can act as a model of political governance and management in both a state perceived as a complex organisation of forced nature as well as in individual elements and areas of such an organisation's activity (including higher education). The consequence of this assumption is the thesis that the quality management processes in higher education can also be analysed as a complex mechanism of mutually connected multi-step games. These games are played simultaneously on multiple levels of institutionalised public decision-making structures by various players appearing in the roles defined by the binding legal order within the bureaucratic structure of the state.

Assumptions and the conceptual apparatus of the organisational game concept and the higher education system

The concept of organisational game was introduced to the theory of organisation and management about forty years ago by M. Crozier and E. Friedberg, and afterwards it appeared almost simultaneously in the Polish scientific literature thanks to A.K. Koźmiński and A. Zawiślak.⁸ The following assumptions and the conceptual apparatus of the organisational game concept refer to Koźmiński and Zawiślak's proposals, but they also use some theses put forward by Crozier, in particular in relation to the specificity of the power relations in bureaucratic structures. However, the leading research approach is the decision-making approach, which adapts

⁸ See: K. Bolesta-Kukułka, *Koncepcja gry organizacyjnej*, [in:] A.K. Koźmiński (ed.), *Współczesne teorie socjologiczne*, Warszawa 1983, pp. 238–273. The initial studies including the assumptions of organisational game were considered to be a book by M. Crozier and E. Friedberg entitled *L'acteur et le système. Les Contraintes de l'action collective*, Paris 1977 and a book by A.K. Koźmiński and A.M. Zawiślak entitled *Pewność i gra. Wstęp do teorii zachowań organizacyjnych*, Warszawa 1979. However, it should be pointed out that the ideas of management as a game and organisational behaviour as players' behaviours appeared in American literature at least a few years earlier, in particular in books by J.G. March and H.A. Simon (quotation from: A.M. Pettigraw, *The Politics of Organizational Decision-Making*, London–Tavistock 1973, passim).

certain concepts and assumptions of the decision-making theory to the description and explanation of decisions made in an organisation⁹ in relation to the part of decisions that are made on behalf of and for the organisation as a whole or its separate organisational and institutional structures (for example, decisions of individual bodies and public institutions, including a university and its bodies). These decisions can be defined as organisational decisions. The basic concepts that make up the conceptual apparatus of the organisational game concept include – in addition to the organisational game concept itself – the concepts of the player (actor), the resources controlled by players, benefits (payments), game rules, player decisions and actions, game observers, player compliance check mechanism, external and internal conditions of the game (including relations between players and the game on the one hand, and the social environment of players on the other, limited rationality of players and sources of uncertainty of organisational decisions, as well as players' strategies and motivation of their behaviour in the game).

When identifying a particular type of game in the form of an organisational game, it should be first pointed out that an organisational game is a game played in a specific, bureaucratically arranged organisational structure. This structure defines both the game pattern itself and its main rules as well as the rules of joining the game, the necessary resources, and payments (benefits). The institutional structure of an organisation as a rule determines also who and in which role can or must take part in a given game. Therefore, an organisational game can be played both in a situation of voluntary participation in the game, but also in a situation of forced participation. It is a multi-step game, whereby the rules of the game may determine both the synchronicity and the diachronicity of the game, and thus the simultaneity of movements or their arrangement in a chain sequence of actions and reactions, often determined precisely both as to how they are made and when particular movements are made. As a rule, it is also a non-zero-sum game, which results in a distribution of benefits and losses between individual players. However, it is not possible to rule out a situation of such a far-reaching antagonism of players in a given organisational structure that will transform a non-zero-sum game into a Boolean game, clearly dividing the players into winners and losers.

From the point of view of a state as a global organisation with a bureaucratic structure of public authority, two game types are of importance here: between the state and the actors of its international environment (other states and international organisations) and between the ruling political power and the public authority

⁹ For the assumptions under the decision-making approach, see: A. Korybski, L. Leszczyński, *Decision Making Approach in a Study of the Enactment and Application of Law*, [in:] A. Bator, Z. Pulka (eds.), *Legal Theory and Philosophy of Law: Towards Contemporary Challenges*, Warsaw 2013, pp. 156–167.

apparatus controlled by it on the one hand and the people subject to the ruling thereof on the other. The former requires a multifaceted analysis of the relationship between the state and the environment, which goes far beyond the scope of the article. It should only be noted that both the resources (including citizens' education) and the benefits that are at stake in the game (including the strengthening of the state's position in the exchange of goods and in civilizational and technological development, whereas for EU Member States – the effectiveness of the state in pushing financial and legislative solutions that strengthen national higher education) can have a significant impact on public policy and management in the area of higher education.

The game between the ruling and the ruled may, in relation to the higher education system, take many institutional forms: legislator-universities as well as other higher education institutions, executive authorities (in particular the minister in charge of higher education) and universities and their associations as well as national or international accreditation institutions vs. universities. It is important to perceive the abovementioned games as complex relationships within the bureaucratic structure of a state. This structure determines the hierarchical shape of public authority and subordinates higher education to state centres of public authority in a specific way. In the history of higher education, many organisational forms of colleges/universities as well as relations between universities and public authorities entitled under the applicable law to shape and implement a public policy in the area of higher education have been established. Nowadays, there are many models of these relations, with the criterion of the degree/scope of autonomy of higher education institutions (universities in particular) being seemingly of fundamental importance in these divisions. This criterion significantly affects the content of higher education as a good produced and offered by higher education institutions and entities interested in obtaining such education (acquisition of properly educated graduates).¹⁰

A characteristic feature of an organisational game resulting from its setting in an appropriate institutionalised structure of a given organisation is the opportunity to play it with the involvement of players that are equal, as well as with the involvement of players connected by a hierarchical superior-subordinate relation. It should be added that such an organisational game creates a complex mechanism of relations involving not only players (which is the assumption of the classic game theory, based on isolating a conflict situation and identifying players as the only actors in

¹⁰ For more on the university models identified in European literature and the relations between universities and public authorities responsible for management in the area of higher education, see – M. Kwiek, *Uniwersytet jako „wspólnota badaczy”?. Polska z europejskiej perspektywy porównawczej i ilościowej*, „Nauka i Szkolnictwo Wyższe” 2012, 40(2), pp. 71–86.

the relationships created by the game), but also other participants in the game. They play appropriate organisational roles in the process of public decision-making (advisers, consultants, experts, etc.) and are tied by cooperative relations with the players. The ruling-ruled relationship is not a one-sided relation, and the scope of power of the ruling is always limited by the resources controlled by the ruled. The ruling competence implemented in the higher education system by public bodies and public institutions in an organisation is always limited by the resources controlled by universities and their associations. It is also necessary to take into account one of the key assumptions of the decision-making approach, portraying the decision-making process as a sequence of organisational behaviours caused by a decision situation and ending not at the moment of a decision being made, but when the decision is implemented. A distinct feature of decision-making in an organisation (including public decision-making in the area of higher education) is the division of roles into the decision-maker, the entity implementing the decision, and the addressee of the decision. This feature forces cooperation between the entities acting as the decision-maker, the addressee, and the implementing entity because the decision-making authority in a broad sense (treated more broadly than the authority to make a public decision) is dispersed. Public decisions taken in the area of higher education (statutory regulations, implementing acts, management decisions regarding the use of financial resources of the state for higher education, administrative decisions, etc.) are also taken within complex multi-stakeholder and multi-level decision processes, and their characteristic feature is also the separation of roles of the decision-maker, the implementing entity, and the addressee.

The games played in an organisation are based on divergent (though not always conflicting) interests, which form a basis for a dispute over access to desirable social goods or force the stakeholders of these interests to collaborate in order to acquire these goods. Each game can be studied as a separate subject of research (in isolation from other games), but also as part of a broader game setting within a given organisational structure. In the latter situation, the mutual coupling of games and players should be taken into account. In typical social situations, individual social stakeholders (individuals, interest groups, institutions, and organisations operating within broader organisational structures) appear, as a rule, as players in many parallel games. This means that regardless of the possibility of identifying individual games played within a given organisation, an organisation itself can also be perceived as a complex system of multi-step, structured games played on many levels of a bureaucratic structure of a given organisation.

Identifying a game as a sort of relationship between relevant social stakeholders acting as players requires identifying the players, the resources they have, and the goals they seek (including strategies adopted in the game). From the point of view

of the number of players, it is necessary to distinguish games with two players (binary games) and games involving more players (non-binary games). However, it is possible to put forward a hypothesis, substantiated as a result of observation of political games, that any non-linear conflict-based game (as opposed to games played as part of a cooperative relationship) shows a tendency to transform into a coalition game and, ultimately, a binary game. The resources available to individual players can be analysed from various research perspectives (type of resources, their quantity or quality, the ability to include resources in the game, etc.).

The interfaces between games played in an organisation justify the application of certain assumptions and theses ascribed to a systemic representation of social phenomena and processes. This applies in particular to the possibility of perceiving an organisation as a system operating in a specific environment. An organisation as a whole has appropriate resources at its disposal, it also has its own interests, treated as organisational goals. It must have the right resources, and at the same time is often forced to play for resources with players who create the environment. However, the perspective of organisational game makes it simultaneously possible to treat the stakeholders operating in the area of higher education as relatively autonomous players striving to pursue their own interests and guided by their own decision-making motives in the game. Players make decisions themselves, but – in particular in games based on the need to work together to achieve the desired goods – within the framework of appropriate procedures and institutions of collaboration. Players can be individuals or organised social groups and their institutions. In the latter case, decisions can be taken collectively or through a selected group representation. The players' ability to act depends on resources (both their own and those at the disposal of the organisation or its individual elements) as well as on the institutional constraints and rules of individual games. In the area of higher education, players are both individuals (applicants, students, doctoral students, participants of other forms of education offered by higher education institutions, academic teachers) and bodies of academic communities acting in the form of higher education institutions or their associations, and the so-called external stakeholders of education processes – employers in particular.

Education quality management in the perspective of an organisational game

Management processes in the area of higher education form a complex mechanism of organisational games. Some of these games, including hierarchical relations between authorities and public authorities on the one hand and universities and

institutions that deliver higher education processes on the other hand, take place according to the ruling-ruled pattern. Other games are controlled games, i.e. games played between universities and other higher education institutions, as well as between universities and individual higher education stakeholder groups. The rules for joining these games, for playing them, and for determining the outcome thereof depend on the public authority decisions of the relevant bodies holding the power to make or apply the law. However, it should be pointed out that today (especially in relation to the EHEA), both the games played following the ruling-ruled pattern as well as the controlled games are subjected to intrinsic supranational legal regulations and control exerted by supranational or international institutions. A ruling-ruled game can also be, at least to some extent, a controlled game. The above statement applies in particular to the relations between public authorities and institutions on the one hand and to the legal order and institutions of an international organisation with transnational competence on the other. The European Union is such an organisation. As regards the dispute between the ruling and the ruled (entities subordinated to the competence of national public authorities, including universities and internal stakeholders of universities), the ruling-ruled game is played within the framework of the institutional and legal order of the European Union. Therefore, it is justified at least to some degree to say that the games played in individual, national areas of higher education (including the Polish higher education system) are now controlled not only by public authorities of individual countries but also – to an increasing extent – by various entities creating the environment of national higher education systems. They design important international or supranational legal regulations binding (formally or informally) the public authorities of individual countries (as in the case of regulations and decisions taken in the Bologna Process, as well as of the secondary legislation of European Union bodies and institutions).

The beginning of the Bologna Process initiated a gradual departure from the vision of higher education as purely national education subordinated only to the law and public policy applied by individual states. The awareness of the necessity to apply this process of transforming higher education in Europe emerged in the last decade of the 20th century. It resulted primarily from the decreasing competitiveness of European universities and the studies offered by them – mostly compared to those offered by the leading American universities. Decisions taken by the ministers of European countries at individual stages of the Bologna Process (from 1999 until today) have been non-binding. They are all agreed political declarations, but due to the agreed political will and the awareness that staying outside the Bologna Process entails the inability to benefit from the creation of the EHEA, the arrangements made under the process have been largely implemented into

individual national higher education systems of European countries. Because of the importance of creating the EHEA for the movement of goods, people, and services (including mobility of students and academic teachers), the objectives of the Bologna Process were also included in the Treaty of Lisbon (2000), and were subsequently partially implemented into the European Union's secondary legislation. The implementation of EU directives by the Member States means a gradual harmonisation of the national organisational game mechanisms in the EHEA, making it in effect possible for players to get involved in and play such games in a much wider organisational space than before. It also leads to an at least partial ineffectiveness of such national legal regulations that would focus on maintaining the monopoly of state public authorities in the area of management of national higher education systems.

The issue of the quality of education was not a separate research subject in most European countries until the 1990s. The ability of higher education institutions to run an education process was determined by a relevant and appropriately competent public authority through decisions on both the creation and the changes and liquidation of a given higher education institution. Such a situation existed, for example, in Poland until 1990. Decisions on the creation, modification, and liquidation of a higher education institution were made by the parliament in the form of a parliamentary act, but those higher education institutions could only have the status of public colleges/schools/universities, entirely dependent – as regards their resources and ability to maintain adequate quality of education – on public resources and preferences of public authorities regarding the allocation of funds. The games played by higher education institutions were controlled to a great extent, limited to the national environment of higher education institutions. A change in the statutory conditions for providing higher education made it possible to create non-public higher education institutions, whereas the control of the degree of fulfilment of the requirements ensuring the desired quality of education was exercised through the competence of the minister in charge of higher education to grant licences to non-public higher education institutions. Therefore, the state resigned from its exclusivity in the area of higher education and formally limited its responsibility for ensuring the quality of education, partly shifting the entitlement to provide education, and thus responsibility for the quality of education, to non-public higher education institutions. However, this was not accompanied by a change in the mechanism of awarding public funds to higher education institutions, and therefore private non-public higher education institutions were pushed into the emerging market of education services. The subordination of higher education institutions to market mechanisms and the necessity to obtain funds making it possible for them to keep on offering education services led to an emphasis on making higher education available to mass audience, exceeding the possibility of maintaining

a proper quality of education. The legislator lacked the vision of the effects of partial privatisation of the higher education system, but they left the then-current principle of financing public education institutions (with the exception of non-public education institutions) and did not address the absence of both external and internal mechanisms to ensure the right quality of education.¹¹ It was only the participation of Poland in the Bologna Process that forced qualitative transformations of the financing rules for education provided by non-public higher education institutions, the introduction of regulations making the state's consent to provide education conditional on meeting statutory requirements related to staffing, curriculum, infrastructure, etc.

Source literature mentions several mutually non-exclusive types of studying the quality of education, including audit, evaluation, benchmarking, and accreditation.¹² At the first stage of establishment of the EHEA (and in several Western countries, such as the Netherlands, Belgium or Germany – in the last decade of the twentieth century), the mechanisms of internal evaluation of education prevailed; the arrangements adopted in 1999 in Bologna provided for, among others, the development of an appropriate methodology for evaluating education by higher education insti-

¹¹ For more on the transformations of the Polish higher education system at the end of the 20th century, see: T. Kraszewski (ed.), *Jakość kształcenia w perspektywie wejścia Polski do Unii Europejskiej*, Płock 2000, passim.

¹² The audit of the quality of education consists in a comprehensive analysis of a given higher education institution providing education, carried out by an independent institution. Its goal is to determine whether the education process is compliant with the adopted education curriculum and within the appropriate institutions and procedures defined as audit criteria. The final result of an audit may be obtaining a certificate of quality of education, which is of importance for the ranking of the audited higher education institution as a player. *Benchmarking* is a comparative analysis of solutions in the field of the quality of education, and it consists in a combination of solutions and practices of one higher education institution and similar solutions and practices of another higher education institution, which, as a rule, is a reference point in determining the quality of education at the compared education institution. Evaluation is a systematic analysis of organisational structures and education processes at a higher education institution, performed on the basis of accepted quality standards and using an appropriate set of measurable (quantitative or qualitative) assessment criteria. Accreditation is, as a rule, defined as a more or less extensive procedure whose aim is to determine that a given university or institution operating in the area of higher education is able to offer appropriate education, obtained through a properly organised educational process. For more about the possibilities of studying the quality of education and applying the abovementioned mechanisms of quality studies in selected higher education systems in Europe, see: J. Kudła, M. Stachowiak-Kudła, *The higher education competition in Poland and the quality of teaching and research: the case of economic and law studies*, "Ekonomia i Prawo" 2014, 13(4), pp. 471–477; M. Stachowiak-Kudła, *Autonomia szkół wyższych a instytucjonalne mechanizmy zapewnienia jakości w Polsce i w wybranych państwach europejskich*, Warszawa 2012, passim. On the other hand, E. Chmielecka, referring to Western literature, identified licencing, reviews, evaluation, and accreditation as mechanisms for ensuring the desired quality of education (cf. E. Chmielecka, *Systemy zapewnienia jakości kształcenia w świecie*, [in:] T. Kraszewski (ed.), op. cit., p. 26.

tutions, based on comparable quantitative and qualitative criteria. With the conclusion of the agreement on Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance and the Qualifications Framework for EHEA by the participants in the Bologna Process in Bergen (2005), the still ongoing process of implementing and developing the accreditation system started out as a universal mechanism for ensuring the quality of education in European higher education. Other mechanisms were treated as mechanisms supporting accreditation and dependent – as to their use – primarily on higher education institutions interested in achieving and maintaining the quality of education process. At the same time, relevant public authorities of individual states retained the opportunity for statutory regulation of evaluation and other forms of examining the quality of education, treating the monitoring of tools and institutions for classifying and comparing European higher education institutions as issues requiring a common position of ministers responsible for education. In the following years, an accreditation system was built taking a form of a network of national accreditation institutions/commissions as ENQA members entered into the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). Each of the national accreditation institutions, although established and operating under a national law, is required to undergo an external evaluation every five years to be performed by an international team of accreditation experts in order to establish whether the EQAR standards are met. It can be concluded that national accreditation agencies are a group of key players in the processes of quality education management both on a national scale and in the European Higher Education Area. However, the institutional framework for games with the involvement of agencies, the same for each accreditation agency, differs significantly due to the diversity of the statutory grounds for the establishment and operation of agencies in individual countries – participants of the Bologna Process.

The Bologna Process radically expanded the field of games played in higher education, and thus offered new opportunities for students and academic staff as players. ENQA was an important stage in the development of the EHEA and in the formation of a new institutional approach to ensuring the desired quality of education – by independent accreditation agencies. It was also supposed to be primarily a national solution. Countries participating in the Bologna Process committed themselves to implement national accreditation systems by 2005. The processes of implementing national accreditation mechanisms in the area of higher education are still in progress, although the establishment of national accreditation agencies ended in 2005. The structural solutions of these mechanisms and the rules of their operation adopted in individual countries differ from each other because accreditation is a solution subject to processes of harmonisation, not unification. The shape of such mechanisms in national higher education systems is affected by many factors

making higher education different, such as the constitutional system of a given state (including the distribution of legislative and executive powers, as well as the unitary or federal system adopted in a given a state), the public policy objectives in the field of education and higher education (largely dependent on the political programme of the ruling party), the statutory rules for financing education (including, in particular, the constitutional regulation of payment for access to education). These factors shape the accreditation models in each country and affect the accreditation models and the institutional and competence-related scope of authority granted to accreditation agencies.

Apart from Anglo-Saxon solutions, different from European ones, it was the state that was responsible for providing higher education and for the quality of education in Europe in the second half of the 20th century because it had the funds necessary to provide education and appropriate legal instruments of influence in the form of legislation (the state itself created regulations concerning public management in higher education, managed higher education institutions, and supported them financially on its own). It had to change with the commencement of the Bologna Process. The obligation to ensure the right quality of education were transferred to higher education institutions, and public authorities were tasked with the obligation to pass such statutory regulations on higher education that enabled the accreditation of higher education institutions by independent accreditation agencies. Higher education institutions were to develop customised Quality Management Systems (QMS), based on an ex-post examination of learning outcomes, rationality of their activity (calculation of costs justified by public benefits achieved through education), monitoring of the functioning of individual elements of the education process and the careers of their graduates, research on the demand of the relevant job market for graduates, etc. Application of QMS at higher education institutions required internal support and team management, including communication with the relevant stakeholders, and this made it possible to distribute the responsibility for the education process differently. It was a step towards quality management. Therefore, the task of the supervision over the quality of education was shifted from public authorities and institutions to higher education institutions and accreditation agencies chosen by higher education institutions themselves for the purpose of carrying out an external evaluation of the quality of the offered education services.

The accreditation solutions adopted in Europe as a mechanism for ensuring the right quality of education are, as should be kept in mind, an important part of the Bologna Process. The process, considered in relation to EU Member States, was designed as one of the key instruments to implement EU's overriding values: free movement of people and services, and – in consequence – to shape the labour market and employment policies on the scale of the entire European Union. Therefore,

there were institutional factors encouraging academic communities and university management staff to engage in a dialogue with both internal and external stakeholders designed in the structure of organisational games related to higher education management. The said stakeholders were also represented in national accreditation agencies. It is also important to mention that public authorities in most European countries withdrew from a top-down determination of education quality criteria adopted in accreditation procedures. Examples of statutory top-down regulation of these criteria are rare and do not undermine the general principle of arranging the criteria for measuring the quality of education (both quantitative and assessment criteria) between accreditation agencies, the interested higher education institutions, and the stakeholders of such higher education institutions.¹³ There are different solutions functioning in most countries of Western Europe. The main differences concern especially the multiplicity of accreditation agencies operating in the area of higher education, the freedom to decide on the form of accreditation/external evaluation, the possibility to select between a national and a foreign accreditation agency, and the freedom to establish new education programmes. The German or Dutch solutions can be a good example here. In the German higher education system, accreditation is based on several key values: an institutional and decision-making independence of accreditation agencies, an intra-system competition of both accreditation agencies (including admission of foreign and international accreditation agencies), a limited openness of higher education services, a full transparency of processes accreditation and their results, and a freedom of higher education institutions to shape the internal education evaluation systems and teaching activities of their employees. The German accreditation mechanism has been adapted to the federal structure of the German state. It was assumed in Germany that the state would withdraw from the controlling function in the accreditation mechanism and provision of education quality, leaving it to higher education institutions and the accreditation agencies of their choice. The state has only retained the competence of a limited game control under the accreditation mechanism (exercised mainly through the legislation of particular federal states that are part of the Federal

¹³ These examples concern mainly parts of Central and Eastern European countries (including the Polish higher education system). It is because there are examples of declarations of autonomy of higher education institutions with simultaneous maintenance of various instruments of control exercised by public authorities in the sphere of higher education, excessive executive powers in shaping the composition and competence of the national accreditation agency, the right of the national accreditation agency to impose rigid criteria for measuring the quality of education by way of internal regulations, as well as the binding decisions of the executive body (minister in charge of higher education or – on their behalf – the national accreditation agency) to create a new programme of studies and its curriculum, etc.

Republic of Germany) – the assumption of limited controllability of the processes taking place in higher education.¹⁴

The current observation of the development of accreditations as an essential instrument for ensuring the desired quality of education, supporting indirect management of higher education institutions by public authorities of particular countries, upholds the thesis about the transitional state of the current accreditation mechanism applied in the European Higher Education Area. The changes made at that time are a leap in terms of quality compared to the previous models of university management and implementation of a quality culture to education processes implemented and managed by higher education institutions. These changes resulted in the creation of a legal and institutional environment of national higher education systems, and, in effect, initiated the introduction of national higher education institutions into the European university network as key players within the EHEA. At present, national accreditation agencies as well as international institutions acting to ensure the right quality of education in the EHEA and entered in the EQAR are full members of this area. The ultimate target for national higher education institutions seems to be to obtain the status of European higher education institutions, diversified in terms of their education offers and organisational forms, but meeting the quality culture standards agreed and adopted for the EHEA.

¹⁴ For more, see: K. Szewior, *Akredytacja w niemieckim szkolnictwie wyższym. Zarys zagadnienia*, Warszawa 2018, pp. 75–318.