

Vast selection of study programmes

2009-04-02

“The University of Warsaw is one of Poland’s leading institutions of higher learning. In the future the fate of such universities will be played out on a general continental plane.

Opportunities to maintain positions in a common educational and research space will be enjoyed by only those which offer modern study programmes and are able to prove substantial scientific achievements. So the purpose of the University of Warsaw is not only to uphold its present standing as one of Poland’s leading institutions of higher learning but also to create solid foundations to place it high on the ranking list of Europe’s best universities” stresses Prof. Katarzyna Chałasińska-Macukow, Rector of the University of Warsaw in an interview for Polish Market’s Maciej Proliński.

What is your opinion about the public debate on Polish education, including promotion of Polish knowledge?

The debate on the health of Polish learning is imperative. But the image of learning and higher education which resulted from the recent discussion was greatly exaggerated. The Ministry of Science and Higher Education set the general tenor of discussion focusing exclusively on failings of the scientific and academic environment. Accusations were levelled at the weaknesses of the innovative potential of Polish schools of higher education, the low utility of the offered education and also at the absence of cooperation between science and the economy. But things are really not as bad as painted. There are disciplines in Poland which have, for long, been highly respected internationally, among them physics, chemistry, chemistry and biology. University of Warsaw students for many years have come first in the most important international programming competitions, returning from foreign scholarships not only with new experience but also with excellent marks. They have very little trouble in finding employment after graduation, while those who decide to continue with Ph.D. studies are

offered continuous contacts with knowledge of excellent quality.

Moving on to the University of Warsaw, what does "Poland's largest university" signify today? To what extent is the University transforming? How far must it change if only through what is happening on the multiunit education market in Poland? Perhaps strength of the University of Warsaw lies in its "conservative" immutability?

The number of students in Poland has been snowballing since 1989. At present it amounts to nearly two million. They study in more than 450 colleges. The majority of these are privately managed colleges, some of which have already created a respectable ranking for themselves. The best of them compete with some faculties of the University of Warsaw, but have a long way to go before becoming a threat to the University's future. The newly created colleges are offering almost exclusively popular, fashionable and "cheap" studies, which means their contribution to the growth of the innovative economy is restricted.

This University is steadily transforming and modernising. New, attractive study programmes are appearing of fundamental importance for the economy based on knowledge. The quality of the University's infrastructure is also improving with each passing year. We are fully aware that when choosing a college for future higher education a secondary school graduate looks not only for one with prestige but also for good study conditions.

The University of Warsaw is also an enormously important centre for meetings, international conventions, not just of a scientific nature. Much happens here outside basic teaching and scientific research.

Such is the natural role of the University, particular in the Polish capital situated half-way between the President's Palace and the Prime Minister's Office. Many events of importance to the whole country take place within the University of Warsaw. Personalities from the world of culture, science and politics pay us visits. Let me just highlight two events which were held here within a period of just a few days. An international conference "NATO – Challenges and tasks" was held here on March 12, organised on NATO's 60th anniversary and the 10th anniversary of Poland's membership in the Alliance. The Foreign Affairs and National Defence m

ministers of Poland and the deputy general secretary of NATO were among those present. Several days later, the University of Warsaw signed an agreement on cooperation with the PL.2012 company responsible for preparing Poland for the European football championship in 2012. Euro 2012 is not about sports alone but a tremendous opportunity for various groups to become integrated and cooperate while also achieving other purposes. Workers of the University's Institute of Sociology will assist in those efforts.

The way you see the University of Warsaw is still also that of "A University in Europe and for Europe" How is that vision being substantiated today? Can the University compete on the European market?

The University of Warsaw is one of Poland's best universities. In the years ahead, however, the fate of higher education institutions will be settled on a general continental plane. Only colleges offering modern study programmes and displaying notable scientific achievements will have an opportunity to maintain their standing on a common educational and research space. The goal of the University of Warsaw is, therefore, not only to uphold its present position of one of Poland's leading colleges but to also to construct solid foundations to have it ranked among Europe's best universities. The University of Warsaw wants to attract the best possible candidates from both Poland and abroad. An incentive to study in Warsaw is to be the quality of education and performed scientific research, first and foremost. The University is opening a growing number of cross- and interdisciplinary studies. The number of studies with English as the study language is also on the rise.

It must be said that Polish universities, to put it mildly, are no world leaders. Why is that and how can it be changed?

Such ranking lists should be treated with great caution. The choice of criteria which guided the authors of the Shanghai list means that only multi-faculty colleges could be ranked high on the list – such which run courses in economics, medicine and the exact sciences – natural and engineering. Due to post-war reforms, such colleges in effect ceased to exist, so it is not surprising that existing schools of higher education are not ranked higher on the Shanghai list in positions where we would prefer them to be. They just do not stand a chance when such

criteria are applied.

The state of health of Polish higher education is largely the outcome of continuous deprivation of adequate finance. That may change owing to funds which are flowing into Poland from the European Union. The University of Warsaw has clear successes to its account as regards winning funds to improve both its educational and research infrastructure.

Could you pinpoint some good examples?

The ancient University campus has regained its former splendour due to financing by European Union structural funds. Almost all buildings situated along Krakowskie Przemieście Street have been entirely reconstructed. EU funds also allowed new buildings of the Law and Administration Faculty and the Faculty of Management to be constructed, and also laboratories operating within the Faculties of Physics, Chemistry and Biology to be equipped. All in all, the University has implemented several dozen projects financed by structural funds.

The University campus in the Ochota district will be the object of enormous changes. Several buildings constructed at various moments and of greatly differing architectural value exist in this area. Within a few years this almost 12-hectare plot is to become a flagship of Polish education and an important place for the University of Warsaw and the entire country. Three buildings for the New Technologies Centre are to be constructed here by 2013, in which research bringing essential innovative values to the economy will be initiated and implemented. Construction of the Centre's first two buildings has been included in the list of key projects in the EU Infrastructure and Environment programme.

The first stage of constructing a new seat for the Faculty of Neo-Philology and the Faculty of Applied Linguistics and East Slavonic Languages is soon to be commenced.

With such a rich educational offer existing Poland, why would you say it is worthwhile studying at the University of Warsaw?

The University has new, original, interdisciplinary programmes of studies it is very proud of. This year it will recruit its first students in such programmes as nanostructures and applications of physics in biology and medicine. Philology and culture studies have been running here for a year now, as well as bio-IT studies and systems biology. There will be a growing number of such studies run by at least two faculties at the University of Warsaw. After all, what is most important in present-day science happens where two disciplines meet.

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