



A school to return to...

Rector of the Warsaw School of Economics (SGH) Professor Tomasz Szapiro talks to Maciej Prolński.

PM Professor, would you say that the Polish scientific and academic community has enough influence on the quality of public debate on Polish science? A few years ago the Minister of Science and Higher Education told “Polish Market”: “Poland deserves a Harvard of its own.”

Harvard – 600 million dollars a year, SGH – 60 million. Both Universities have 12 thousand students. Harvard – 250 academics and 1,200 support staff, SGH – over 500 academics, including more than one hundred foreign-language teachers, and less than five hundred administrators and support staff. In Harvard they don't teach every student two foreign languages in the course of their studies, as we do at SGH. Good employment prospects after graduation – that's where we can really compare. We provide this for a tenth of the funds, while they need only half our academic staff, but with five administrative support employees per one academic, compared with our one to one.

We don't stand comparison in terms of publishing volume in reputable academic and scientific journals, the sheer amount of funds obtained from the private sector and donors, or the statutory framework regulating those areas. Minister Kudrycka's statement referred specifically to that. She used the comparison comment to appeal to higher-education institutions to provide funds – increase spending, change their employment structure, and put emphasis on innovative research and the commercialisation of results.

PM ...including funding and promoting science?

Underfinancing has been a serious problem here for decades. After all, science can't flourish without investment, without money – a certain amount of funds must also go to the people who practise science. If a new scientific field appears, but with low pay, then creative people will stay out of it – it will not attract them. They will find a place to pursue their passions elsewhere, where the pay is better. Science should provide not just intellectual satisfaction, but also financial reward. Finally, there's no good education without scientific research, and vice versa. Polish higher-education institutions take part in various debates on these subjects – from community and local-government forums to those within the Conference of Rectors of Academic Schools in Poland (KRASP) headed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education. Our ambition is to raise the perceived significance of how intellectual capital affects economic development and to make people understand the damage done by underfinancing science and the insufficient cooperation between the private sector and universities. Clearly, steps have been taken in the right direction, as initiated a few years ago by Minister Kudrycka.

PM How far-reaching have they been?

In my opinion, science-funding reform has been crucial. Today, public money for research projects is dispensed by committees independent of the Ministry. The National Science Centre, as an external agency, distributes the funds for basic research, and the National Centre for Research and Development allocates funds for applied research at the implementation stage. Both institutions base

their decisions on scientific, not administrative, criteria. They are transparent – you can easily see online which centres have received how much funds. This system is becoming established and it's leaving behind the various teething troubles it grappled with. Independence is an important factor in this area, because it is the scientists who know better than civil servants or politicians which projects hold the most potential and opportunities for global success.

PM Is the independence of higher-education institutions the only way to achieve success?

Independence, high-quality teaching and being open to the world – these ingredients definitely make a good recipe for success. However, Polish higher-education institutions must also be open to the needs of the business environment – companies and students. It is also vital that we are moving away from standardising the curricula and running a strict list of majors at the Ministry, so that higher-education institutions select their own specialisations, monitor the needs of their local labour markets, and take advantage of their own outstanding scientists and academics. Another important area of change involves opening up to international partners, foreign students and prominent scientists, who, I believe, will be coming to Poland more and more often, to teach and conduct research. Strong competition, high ambitions and readiness to work hard are the most important factors in raising quality, or pursuing what I call “innovation in science”.

PM We are halfway into your first term as Rector of SGH. You took over the post as a man of science with enormous experience. "We are starting to build the new structure of the school – an association of three independent schools – with clearly-defined areas of interest and effectiveness," you said during your inaugural speech in 2012, referring to your plan to develop SGH by establishing a School of Business, a School of Economics and a School of Public Policy. What is this strategy aiming at?

The oldest school of economics in Poland and among the leaders in Europe simply needs a well-defined package and a clear message to everyone who needs us. That is why we chose those, and no other, names for our units to consolidate the previous ones. The School of Business will teach managers of big corporations, but also small and medium-sized enterprises. The School of Economics – analysts in the public and private sector. The School of Public Policy – managers operating in the public sector and those who will work to regulate this sector. The new schools will be significantly more autonomous and will share the financial responsibility for their fields of study. These changes are aimed at increasing the research potential and the capacity to procure funds for research, while consistently improving the quality of studies and the efficiency of managing the entire institution. We will start the academic year 2014/2015 under the new organisational structure, and in 2015/2016 students will be subject to greater supervision of the Schools after their first year of studies.

PM Today the Polish market has top-quality managers (in international corporations and companies of various sizes). Is this also true of our public sector?

Public policy is a very stable source of jobs globally. Where, for example, the financial-services sector demonstrates considerable volatility, the demand for management in the public sector remains steady. In Poland most people are interested in working for the private sector. People often say that the problems with such areas as health-care or transport are caused by the shortage of good public-sector managers, who are well prepared for working in the market economy. We want our School of Public Policy to provide thoroughly-educated staff. SGH is seen as a robust centre for financial education. The School of Public Policy is going to help the education market realise that there are other professions which offer high salaries and

satisfaction. We have the potential to meet this demand.

PM Polish higher-education institutions, to put it mildly, are not exactly leaders in international rankings. How can we change this? Can SGH become competitive on the European market in the future?

We started by comparing Harvard Business School with SGH. They are part of the same global economy, and yet they remain completely non-comparable in the rankings! Polish journalists and politicians often bring up the "Shanghai Ranking". In this ranking, which appears in so many comments, even though it is obviously not the only one available, a single criterion rules out hundreds of universities for years. It is the number of Nobel Prize Winners working at a given university. Well, this is not the most advantageous criterion for us, and catching up is extremely difficult in this area. Let's also not forget that we're not direct competitors on the same education markets – American universities don't have branches in Poland, even though the demand for education, including commercial education, is stable.

PM Does it mean that we are behind in science, but much better in teaching?

That's right. The good Polish universities teach students who find jobs – both in this country and abroad. There's a growing number of foreign students, which is an achievement, considering the fact that we're not in the part of Europe that can attract students with highly-varied propositions. This is also true for Warsaw... We have only an indirect influence on the world around us. What can we do? We can definitely create new elite inter-faculty studies, increase student exchange, provide more classes in English, introduce internal education-quality-rating systems, develop teaching based on innovative computer networks and mobile technologies, and create a brand-new science centre in collaboration with business. It is my conviction that the restructuring of SGH will eventually improve our results in international rankings.

PM What are SGH's most popular lectures?

You might be surprised. Lectures aren't really part of any major here. Finding a free place in the Children's University of Economics that operates at our school has been the most difficult. It is an economic-education project addressed to fifth- and sixth-graders from primary schools. The lessons begin in March and end in June. Admission is free and there are 160 places for young students.

The programme is co-financed by the National Bank of Poland. The thematic area is designed in such a way as to allow young students to learn the basics of how the economy and economic phenomena work in real life. During our classes we answer such questions as "where does the money come from?" and "what are banks for?"

PM Coming back to the "mature" academic community; in brief – why is it worth studying at SGH, considering the extensive educational options available in Poland?

Our School of Economics provides education which is specifically tailored to the labour-market requirements – with the best researchers and specialists in all economics-related fields. SGH has for many years provided top class specialists, including analysts, whose knowledge and skills are highly valued on the labour market. This is guaranteed by an ambitious and modern curriculum and extensive academic research conducted in house. The academic research results in over 1.5 thousand publications by SGH employees each year – in the form of books, monographs, handbooks, and articles. It's worth emphasising that Bachelor's Degree studies begin with sessions attended by all first-year students. Later, when the students know the basics and have grasped a range of programmes, they choose their course of studies and specialisation. The individual course of studies is limited only by the curriculum requirements – for example, certain subjects are obligatory in finance and they can't be replaced with, say, a marketing course – and organisational factors – for example we are unable to organise lessons for just two students. This leaves a lot of choice to students as regards to classes and lecturers. SGH also provides a few dozen postgraduate-study programmes for graduates of various higher-education institutions who have, in most cases, already begun their professional careers, and would like to extend their skills to increase their attractiveness on the labour market. In today's globalised world you can't be an economist without being proficient in a foreign language. We provide our students with two obligatory foreign-language courses – not general, but based on the vocabulary of the profession. What else? People used to say "I passed my secondary-school-leaving exam and moved on to graduate from a university" Today, believe me, people come to SGH as children and later return to it many times in their lives. :