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## **How to assess the effectiveness of the informal learning? Controversies about the procedures PLA (Prior Learning Assessment) in Polish higher education**

**Summary:** The author discusses the phenomenon of the informal learning. Furthermore, she presents the assessment principles of life and work experience at universities which should be equalized with academic knowledge.

**Keywords:** higher education, informal learning, adult education, work experience, life experience.

### **Introduction**

Ever Since the lectures for non-student adults appeared (so - called university extension) there have been many efforts made to help them to graduate from universities faster and in a less complicated way than it takes place at universities where students study regularly.

To simplify the whole process, extramural studies, e-learning and some changes in school legislation were introduced. However, as time went by another crucial issue has been outlined that became the reason of the further changes in universities policy. It was connected with the fact that adult learners have bigger life and work experience than young students. The recognition of this issue as equivalent to certain areas of academic knowledge in different fields of study, led to elaborating the assessment procedure of it. At universities in some countries, like Sweden, The USA or Canada this kind of assessment has been accepted.

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A discussion about this issue was also raised in Poland; however, the law which was in force at that time, prevented the development and implementation of these new solutions. Due to the fact that the new act on higher education came into force (11<sup>th</sup> July 2014) the presence of such procedures at Polish universities seems to be justified, especially now when this subject has appeared at MNISW website and it has been declared as one of the most significant and fundamental changes in university education. However, this issue still receives negative feedback, there are too many doubts and controversies about it, that is why this subject should be scrutinized.

### **The essence of the assessment procedures of the informal learning effectiveness (PLA)**

For the first time the recognition of the informal learning results was highlighted in 2000 in the European document called “A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning”. In this report there are some key activities mentioned that should be taken to make lifelong learning more effective. The fourth paragraph that appears in this document deals with the recognition and the knowledge assessment that people acquire during the process of informal learning. The main purpose of these activities comprise increasing adults' motivation for studying, appreciation of their experience at European job market (so called credit transfer) and educational activation to study by people who often postpone the idea of studying because of some reason, for example because of the domestic duties.

The aim of PLA procedures (Prior Learning Assessment) is also to strengthen the self-esteem and to improve an adult self-perception not only as a worker, but also as a person who wants to study more, using these procedures may also show the skills and knowledge that an adult possesses, but may not be aware of (A Memorandum... 2000: 15)

In the above mentioned document (Memorandum) some other controversial subjects that should be discussed are emphasized. These issues are still very up-to-date. In other words, these are some questions that must be answered by the Polish academic staff that have to face the challenge to elaborate the evaluation procedures acquired outside the classroom; moreover, the procedures have to meet with the senate approval.

In Memorandum some major issues that need to be discussed are enumerated, namely

- Elaboration of the meticulous assessment procedures of the informal learning effectiveness, that will give the possibility to transfer credit in many European countries.
- The PLA procedures may also include the use of the tools that have been already known in Europe, for instance, ECTS, diploma supplement, ECDL, Europass, EVS (European Voluntary Service)
- The aim of the experience assessment acquired during the informal learning process is not only to educate an adult but also improve his or her situation in the labor market
- The Assessment Procedures of the informal learning require the partnership extension between educational institutions, job market, associations etc.(A Memorandum... 2000: 16)

The assessment procedures of the knowledge that is acquired outside the classroom are called differently. In English literature an abbreviation RPL usually appears (Recognition of Prior Learning) however some other terms are also used:

- In the United Kingdom APEL (Accreditation of Prior Experimental Learning) and APL (Accreditation of Prior Learning) or CCC (Crediting Current Competence)
- In Australia and New Zealand, RPL is in practice
- In Canada, PLAR is usually used (Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition) or RCC (Recognition of Current Competence) ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Recognition\\_of\\_prior\\_learning](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Recognition_of_prior_learning) 9.10.2014)

The universal abbreviation PLA (Prior Learning Assessment) is also used in this article. The traditions of using these types of procedures in European countries date back to the 1980's and were conducted under vocational education system; moreover, they were the forms of improving job qualifications and expanding skills by adults who demanded recognition of their experience. However, these procedures also started to be used in tertiary education that gave adults (especially

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non-traditional students)<sup>1</sup>. Better prospects to graduate from universities and get a diploma. In the 1940's the universities officials in the United States were obliged, for the very first time, to use different organizational solutions and implement something, that later was transformed from G. I Bill of Rights into PLA. G. I Bill of Rights gave the right to study by the veterans of World War II.

According to Ursule Critoph PLA procedures can be defined this way: *the process of identification, the assessment and recognition of someone's knowledge and skills.* (Critoph 1998: 61). First of all, the recognition of the informal learning and work experience that is acquired outside the classroom is the major aim of implementing these procedures. Secondly, the recognition and the official approval of this kind of knowledge and experience makes the time of studying shorter, because adult students receive credit points for that.(European system called ECTS) this procedure makes studying less expensive, less time consuming and in the consequence, it expedites the process of getting a diploma. Thirdly, it is an effective mechanism that simplifies the process of studying. Moreover, if adults work and life experience is officially appreciated by the university officials, they do not have to attend some university courses and do not have to pass the subject exams that are known to them. The next aspect is connected with the support that is given by the university officials; namely, adults do not have to attend university courses, they do not have to practice and study things that they have already trained and have become familiar with.

It is also worth mentioning the benefits and advantages that procedures generate to the university, namely, the bigger number of the applicants who want to be enrolled at the university, popularization of some degree courses, bigger individualization in the learning process, working on the concept of the friendly university that gives practical knowledge to its students. Finally, the use of PLA procedures at universities corresponds with the lifelong learning conception that enables the effective process of learning through the lifetime, and helps to overcome different barriers, that are not only connected with the getting access to the education but also with the process of its realization.

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<sup>1</sup> The term *non-traditional students* is used in Anglo-Saxon countries and usually defines adults, immigrants, disabled, the first people in the family history who go to university, people from poor social background etc.

Charles Bélanger and Joan Mount analyze the survey OECD and point to three ways of using PLA procedures internationally:

1. The assessment of the discrepancy between the qualifications an adult possesses with the ones that are required from him or her, this issue has a major impact on elaborating the plan of learning that helps to get additional qualifications, this way of using the PLA procedures is popular in France.
2. The assessment of the possessed knowledge and work abilities that are acquired through an individual experience, such procedure helps to define adults work qualifications or at least some of them can be checked (qualifications that he or she has to show) this way of using PLA procedures can be met, for example, in England or Australia.
3. The assessment and the verification of the knowledge and skills level in order to get credit points at university, this way of using PLA procedures is practiced, for instance, in the USA or Canada (Bélanger, Mount 1998: 101)

Bélanger and Mount (1998: 103) show that PLA procedures use is profitable, not only at universities but at all educational institutions. These benefits include; an adequate reaction for the disadvantageous demographic trends in teenagers population, an attempt to differentiate groups of students, adaptation to changing tendencies in the labor market, adjustment of the job qualifications, aspiration to more effective use of human potentiality and results of informal learning, the prevention of the material revision in education, an attempt to increase effectiveness in education and better coordination between educational institutions, universities and job market. To sum it up, the meaningfulness of PLA procedures implementation can be understood the same way as in Bruce Spencer's opinion (2005), namely, that it is one of the transformation ways of the post-secondary education that lives up to modern social reality expectations

### **Methodology of the PLA procedures**

In the academic environment where PLA procedures have been practiced many times, different methods are used to check the knowledge and experience acquired outside the classroom. Various exams, tests,

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individual interviews, evaluation of the portfolio, essays, observations, simulations and case studies are often used. However, the most important element of these procedures is connected with showing by an adult (who wants to have his or her qualifications accepted and recognized) the correlation between acquired experience and the content of the particular university course. Jens Bjørnåvold states, that well organized PLA procedures should proceed according to answers to such questions: what is checked?(content), where is the checking carried out ? (places, institutions) when the checking is carried out? (time duration) how it is done (methodology) (Bjørnåvold 2000: 137) During the use of PLA procedures, adult knowledge and skills that he or she has acquired outside the classroom are evaluated. It means that the informal learning results that are achieved in the process of self-development in work, domestic and local environment, during the journey, internships, practice, voluntary work and military service, hobby and family life etc. are the subject of verification and recognition. All kinds of different courses and qualifications certificates are important and are enclosed with the documentation. However, the results of the learning in other educational institutions (non- formal) can be verified easier and can be recognized as on official course credit at the university. The most troublesome issue is connected with the human life assessment that is certified in no way. The preparation of the required documents by an adult is advantageous, it gives the opportunity to reflect and to think of his or her experience or choices and also to emphasize such an area of academic knowledge that can be treated as equivalent to acquired experience At international universities where PLA procedures are practiced a lot of books and guidebooks have been published, they are directed to adults, who want to go through this procedure, to academic staff board and to other members of the committee (for example, to the employers who assess the adult achievements). In these guidebooks the adviser function is highlighted, this counselor tells what kind of experience and how this experience can be recognized by the committee, the adviser helps to fill in the appropriate applications, she suggests what kind of required documents should be collected, she also helps to establish the purpose for which PLA procedures are to be carried out. The counselor has a very significant function in the whole assessment process, because every situation and experience is different, as well as the adults needs. In that case, even the best prepared guidebook may not contain all the needed tips, solutions

and examples that correlate with individual adult needs. Owing to the adviser, an adult is able to show his or her experience at different universities and adjust the way of presentation to the particular university methodology. PLA procedures are usually carried out by the committee. They are organized differently, in accordance with the particular university expectations, additionally the counselor from the group of the external stakeholders is chosen. Some committees made of academic teacher representatives and external stakeholders, where every member of the committee has the right and equal vote are also created. People and institutions that can give opinions and take part in committee works usually include: entrepreneur (employer), employers, associations (for example, chamber of commerce, chambers of doctors etc.), practitioners, assessors (evaluators; for instance, educational supervisory body) careers officers, student government representatives, the organizations that give certificates for having job qualification (specialist ones, in particular) local authorities, foundations, trade unions (Gobeil 2008: 9)

General model of the PLA procedure may look this way:

1. Preliminary stage – an adult is willing to go through the procedure and is interested in getting necessary information concerning the procedure process at particular university;
2. Advisory stage – an adult meets with the adviser who deals with PLA procedures, the counselor helps to establish the assessment purpose
3. Preparation stage – an adult collects all the required documents and fills in the application in which he or she explains the reason of going through the procedure, furthermore, he or she prepares for the other assessment procedures
4. Assessment stage – an adult submits documents, he or she goes through the examination process, does the tests, shows the practical abilities etc.;
5. Stage of giving credits -the committee decides about granting or refusing to give credits for the knowledge and skills that an adult presented, the committee determines, which university courses can be given credit this way, marks are implemented into the university basis of information that includes adult personal data (student)
6. Stage of further job and educational plan analysis – an adult prepares plan on its own or with an adviser, make changes if it is necessary (Simosko, Cook 1996)

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This description shows how the procedure is perceived from an adult point of view, who is the subject of such assessment.

However, according to the member of the assessment committee this process can be described in this way:

1. Criteria definition – a committee is responsible for establishing criteria and standards according to which the assessment comes into operation, the committee is obliged to define demands that have to be fulfilled by an adult
2. The choice of the assessment method –the committee adjust the assessment methods of an individual adult experience according to the kind of this experience, and the purpose of it, the committee defines what university courses correlate with an adult experience and, therefore can be given credit, there are many methods to choose (they are presented below in this article)
3. Implementing of the assessment methods – the committee evaluates, analyses the documents that have been submitted, conducts tests, exams etc.
4. Observation – the committee observes an adult behavior during the performance of his or her practical skills;
5. Giving the final assessment– the committee gives the marks for the presented knowledge and skills, it grants or does not grant credits, they formulate the opinion about the giving credit for particular subjects (Prior Learning... 2006: 9)

To support the candidates, who want to go through the assessment process successfully, many universities offer free online courses where the moodle platform is used, the participants can use of different online brochures and guidebooks where the sample documents can be found (for example, essays, portfolios) that help to understand particular assessment phases. In these guidebooks the prices for the assessment proceeding are also given; for example, at universities in state of Maryland in the USA, there are 15 credits to collect, for every credit point that complies with PLA procedure adults pay \$336. In Polish school legislation an average limit of points ECTS that can be received when a student go through the PLA procedures have also been defined. In the meantime, at the international universities where these procedures have been practiced for many years the limits are very high – at some

universities an adult can get this way even 75 percentage points on the particular level of studying.

### **Determinants of the PLA procedures effectiveness**

In Poland PLA procedures assessment has not been carried out, they are still in the incipient phase of realization and are treated as a kind of experiment. That is why, it is advisable to refer to the international survey, especially when we want to become familiar with the factors that motivate people to go through them and on their effectiveness. The Swedes and the Canadians specialize in using PLA procedures. In 2005 a special Canadian report was published that showed the main reason for using PLA procedures (Livingstone, Raykov, Turner 2005: 3-9):

- adults age – these procedures are the most popular among young people by age 44, however when they turn 45 their will to take part in them considerably decreases;
- the level of education – People who have the secondary education and people who resume studying at the university have a positive attitude towards PLA procedures; however, adults who have a diploma or the specialist course certificate are usually unwilling to go through them;
- the considerable differences because of the sex have not been observed;
- people of other races than white more often go through PLA procedures;
- the significant differences between the native Canadians and the immigrants have not been perceived;
- People who are eagerly involved in self-development are more willing to take part in PLA procedures;
- The PLA procedures are very popular among people who were expelled from schools;

In Poland the determinants of the participating in PLA procedures may rely on some crucial factors; age, sex, the place of living, the amount of income or the analysis of the profitability of these procedures. If it turns out that the price that is suggested by the university for conducting the procedures is too high and the number of ECTS points

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too little to get, then the adults may not be willing to involve in the assessment process. For many people, especially in the middle age the major discouraging factor to take part in these procedures is connected with the fear of being assessed. Passing the exams during the studying process seems to be challenging for some students, although they usually manage to do it without problems. However, they are often convinced that they may not succeed and do not to get a mark that would satisfy them. Finally, people in the middle age have got their own children or even grandchildren who go to school, that is why the fear of the defeat that is shameful in their opinion in case of getting a low mark prevails. In my opinion these significant factors may discourage adults to go through PLA procedures in Poland. However, these theories should be verified after implementation of these procedures at universities.

### **PLA procedures in Poland – legal status and solution proposals**

The amended act of the higher education enables to give credit for some subjects and gain ECTS points by adults on the basis of the experience they have. The amendment of the MNISW act was advertised at the internet web page with some conspicuous slogans, among them this one was emphasized:

**“Learning throughout life - a chance for adults to complete their education.** Universities will be able to give recognition to the knowledge and abilities that are acquired at different courses, training, at work and during voluntary work. This solution will give an opportunity to study by workers, who want to change their profession or to complete their education” (<https://www.nauka.gov.pl/aktualnosci-ministerstwo/nowelizacja-ustawy-o-szkolnictwie-wyzszym-opublikowana-w-dzienniku-ustaw.html> [29.10.2014])

Additionally, a piece of information was given as justification: “In the European Union about 10 percent of adults study, in Poland this number does not increase 4 percent-it is definitely too little. Therefore, the law has been changed”. The source of this information is; however, not known, there is no reference to Poland and other countries. Besides, this sentence is constructed wrong -Poland also belongs to the European Union countries -the question arises, whether these 10 percent include Polish students ? In the amended act of the higher education there is a phrase “ the results of learning” that determines the knowledge and

skills acquired outside the academic environment. The Senate is obliged to define all the procedures, however the committees are responsible for their implementation. The results of the learning in the fields of studies, for which the educational standards have been defined are not taken into consideration. It is the first but not the last restriction that appeared in this act. That is why, it is not known, how the students of the pedagogy should be treated, since the standards for the teaching specialty were defined. In that case the question arises, whether all the pedagogy students should be excluded from the process of experience assessment, or whether this issue concerns only the students who opt for being teachers ? It can be assumed that only ECTS points that are collected from the range of general university courses (connected with the fields of studying, or general university courses) not specialization ones will be acknowledged. Time periods for the people who apply for the recognition of the informal learning effectiveness have been established. If a candidate applies for being enrolled at university with the aim of getting a bachelor's degree or getting a master's degree he or she must possess both the high school graduation certificate and also have 5 years of work experience; however, if he or she applies for being enrolled at complementary master extramural studies, in addition to the bachelor's degree diploma she must have 3 years of work experience. In case when a candidate tries to do another major in another faculty, in addition to the master's degree diploma he or she must have at least 2 years of work experience (Act... art. 170g). The graduates of special social services colleges or teaching foreign language colleges are not obliged to have 5 years of work experience. This is a serious restriction that is embedded in legal regulations that concern the Polish higher education. Only the job experience may be assessed, however, the thorough definition of what this term describes has not been clearly explained. It is not known if experience acquired during regular work is only to be evaluated, as well as knowledge and skills acquired during the process of self-development connected with improving job qualifications.

Furthermore, people who could not find a job after getting a bachelor's degree diploma or after passing matriculation exam are excluded from these procedures. It does not mean, however, that these people did not gain any experience at that time. Moreover, most part of the experience that is acquired in everyday life by means of travelling,

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taking voluntary work and taking care of children at home is not taken into consideration as well. It is worth mentioning that only one area in the Polish assessment procedures can be taken into account, which makes the whole process deficient. It is believed that the next amendment of the act will include other dimensions of adults' informal learning. A limit of maximum 50 percent of ECTS points to gain in the process of assessment of the acquired experience and skills has been established. It is an average level, however, it is not as low as it could be expected. Everything depends on ECTS points distribution at various university courses at particular university. The differences can be considerable - for the same course university can grant three points, however it can also give 6 or 8 points. Everything depends on number of hours and forms that are taken during the course realization. In this way people who apply for getting credit for their experience may be given the same number of ECTS points and may have bigger or smaller amount of courses to go through with. The next limit is connected with the number of people, whose ECTS points can be equal to their experience. This number is not in excess of 20 percent of students of the particular department and level of education. Of course, a bigger number of people may go through the assessment procedure, however, only the above mentioned; 20 percent of people can be treated this way. This kind of restriction does not appear at international universities. The assessment procedures of knowledge and skills that are acquired outside the academic environment constitutes some kind of novelty in the higher education. At this moment; however, it is not known how adults will refer to it and how much of interest it will arise, especially that the big number of people, who could make use of them were excluded from the act in the very beginning

### **The criticism of the PLA procedures**

In spite of the fact that the assessment procedures of the adults informal learning effectiveness give many possibilities and constitute an incentive for adults to start studying, it has also got some disadvantages. According to the Bélanger and Mount's survey (1998:107) that was conducted at seventy - four Canadian universities it appears that PLA procedures are usually not taken voluntarily by academic society, but are treated as a necessity (people are forced

by their employers, by associates who want to improve their job qualifications, because of shortage of money at the university, and because the university executive board wants to recruit new students). The same situation relates to universities in Poland. Abroad, however the decision on implementation of the assessment procedures of the informal learning effectiveness are taken (generally they are practiced). Moreover, an issue of the realization process of these procedures is also discussed. In Poland, in the meantime these procedures have been implemented by the special executives, without consulting anybody, people were given no choice. Just like in case of all different solutions that ministry imposes. Regardless of the fact that Bologna process resolutions were considered as recommendations or proposals in Poland they are treated as commands and offers that cannot be refused, the meaning and significance of them in studying process is not taken into consideration. It can be stated (like in above mentioned survey) that in Poland these procedures were implemented by force, the main reason of it was connected with the will to overcome unfavorable demographic trends and because of the considerable decrease in number of students. Moreover, it provides the universities additional source of income. Nowadays, the universities around the world are pressurized. The employers, the mass media, the university executive board and people who decide on financial aspects have huge demands. Ursule Critoph itemize in her report (1998: 62) fourteen rules of procedures realization. One of them deals with the implementation of the procedures without strict rules, but on the basis of free choice or as an option to choose (a chance to develop) for the university, not as an obligation.

Meanwhile, at universities in Poland PLA, KRK and other changes that have been introduced recently are treated obligatory. Therefore, the free way of using the assessment procedures of the informal learning results seems to be inadequate to the present situation. The next significant issue that appeared in the mass media after the amendment of the higher education act was concerned with the fear of the depreciation of the diploma value. If you do not have to attend the university courses, if going through the procedure is a sufficient factor for being evaluated and in this way you can receive credit for even a half of demanded university courses, some doubts about the quality of the studying and the value of the diploma that is obtained this way

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appears. Of course, there are people who claim that the university diploma in Poland is treated now with less respect than it used to be and that getting the bachelor's degree or the master's degree does not equal with the same privileges and prestige than in the past. However, the comments and the doubts about the depreciation of the diploma value because of the PLA procedures implementation may be expressed by some formal, organized, structured education supporters, who do not have a big experience in self-development and who are not familiar with the rules of these procedures that are practiced internationally. The next aspect that raises doubts is concerned with the fact that not every kind of knowledge may be assessed accurately and expressed in the form of particular effects, and not every kind of it can be transformed into ECTS points. Of course, international universities have made up many ways to verify the knowledge and skills that are acquired outside the classroom. Polish universities face the task of doing similar verification, as well as preparing criterion referenced assessment. It seems unquestionable that some areas of the knowledge and abilities, will go through the assessment procedures with difficulty, especially that some dimensions of informal learning can be described as only slightly tangible. The same issue concerns the quality of learning, we try to measure it in different ways, we try to express it by the means of many various criteria; however, the concept of quality is something that lasts longer. One of the aspects that characterizes the quality of education is connected with the graduate student's life after completing studies. Therefore, some areas of adult knowledge and skills can be recognized in the future, not during the assessment process, which is carried out by the committee. In Canada, where PLA procedures are quite popular and are used much more often, the national survey showed that only more than half of adults took interest in them. When people were asked, if they would like to take part in education process if the part of the studying was given credit on the basis of their experience, 52,8 percent of people said YES, the rest said No. However, people who study because they want to improve their job qualifications take more interest in these procedures (Livingstone, Raykov, Turner 2005: 2). It can be assumed that the situation will look similar after implementation of the PLA procedures into higher education system in Poland. Everything will depend on the successful organization of these procedures by particular universities. According to the rules, the chances

to get ECTS points in accordance with PLA procedures have got people with job experience, and this issue is to be the only factor that is going to be taken into account during the assessment process. It can be inferred that only people who start studying for career objectives will be able to make use of these informal learning results. Nevertheless, when somebody will gain experience during voluntary work or during the time of raising a child it will not be taken into consideration. Another controversial issue that is concerned with the Polish assessment procedures of the learning effectiveness outside the classroom is the lack of the possibility to make studies last shorter. The implementation of PLA procedures at the international universities aimed at encouraging the adults to study, reducing the costs of this process, prevention of learning material revision and precipitation of the studying duration time. It is possible at international universities, because the plans are usually prepared by students, who with the advisers' support choose courses that comprise the studied specialist and complementary areas (these courses are usually of different academic disciplines, for example, the humanities for the students of physics). In that case receiving credit for some subjects on the basis of PLA procedures makes studies last faster, because students can start to study at the higher term. This resolution would be unacceptable according to the Polish higher education law, where strict rule about the amount and time duration of terms at every level of studying are enforced. Furthermore, most of the universities work on the basis of some strict studying plans, where some principles of adjusting the particular subject to the term and the level of studying are presented, moreover, a choice of subjects to study is limited.

Another issue that should be considered is connected with students' honesty. As long as the presentation of abilities in front of the committee does not raise doubts, the submitting of the statement or writing an essay by the candidate do not have to reflect the truth on his or her real knowledge and abilities. It is a serious problem, particularly now when high standards of education are in operation, therefore, the universities executive board should opt for implementing triangulation—a technique that facilitates validation of data through cross verification. At international universities' candidate's dishonesty is excoriated, there are even financial penalties expected if information about informal learning effectiveness is not real. Regardless of its faults, PLA

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procedures system gives the candidates who want to start studying many possibilities, these procedures simplify the whole process. However, it seems that in Poland another foreign pattern is assumed to be practically implemented, even without understanding its essence, basic functional rules, purposes to fulfill and the benefits that it may bring.

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