

From Battlefield to the Academic Hall: Introduction of Historical European Martial Arts (HEMA) into Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract. The integration of Historical European Martial Arts (HEMA), particularly Signum Polonicum, into higher education offers unique opportunities to preserve cultural heritage, diversify curricula, and foster interdisciplinary learning. Signum Polonicum, rooted in Polish history and military tradition, focuses on traditional weaponry like the hussar sabre and lance. However, challenges such as limited awareness of this particular martial art, lack of standardisation, and logistical constraints hinder its adoption. This study proposes a structured methodology to incorporate HEMA into academia, encompassing curriculum development, practical training, and interdisciplinary research. Practical components include standardised training, instructor certification, and safety protocols, while theoretical modules explore historical context, biomechanics, and pedagogy. Interdisciplinary connections to history, literature, and cultural studies enrich the educational value. Cultural promotion through events, partnerships, and global collaboration further enhances HEMA's relevance. By addressing challenges and leveraging opportunities, institutions can bridge physical practice with academic inquiry, preserving intangible cultural heritage and fostering a deeper appreciation for historical martial arts.

Keywords: Signum Polonicum; fencing; palcat; HEMA; implementation.

Introduction. Martial arts have long been a significant cultural and physical practice, blending physical skill, discipline, and philosophical underpinnings (Cynarski, 2019; Cynarski, 2020; Green & Svinth, 2019; Jaquet, 2020). While Asian martial arts like karate, taekwondo, and judo are well-integrated into global higher education curricula, Historical European Martial Arts (HEMA) have only gained traction in recent years, reflecting the growing interest in reviving traditional forms of combat rooted in Western history. Among these, the Polish martial art Signum Polonicum, which focuses on the use of traditional period weaponry – namely hussar sabre, singlestick (palcat), lance, pickaxe and scythe – occupies a unique position (Cynarski, 2009; Marsden, 2015; Marynowski, 2024; Sawicki, 2004). This elaboration examines the challenges and opportunities associated with integrating such martial arts into higher education institutions.

Purpose: to reveal the methodology of HEMA implementation in higher education institutions.

Material and methods. The following methods were used to solve the research tasks: analysis of scientific and methodological literature, generalization of best practices.

The results of the study and their discussion. Challenges in incorporating historical martial arts:

1. Lack of awareness and representation. Historical martial arts, particularly those ones specific to a single nation like Signum Polonicum, often suffer from limited global recognition. Unlike widely commercialised martial arts from Asia, European martial traditions are typically confined to niche communities. This lack of visibility limits their inclusion into educational programs.

2. Standardisation of techniques. Many historical martial arts, including Signum Polonicum, are reconstructed from historical manuals and artifacts, provided they are available. The lack of universally accepted codification has made it challenging to establish a standardised curriculum suitable for higher education institutions especially with the presence of sport fencing. In contrast, Asian martial arts often benefit from decades or sometimes even centuries of systematised instruction.

3. Practical limitations. Introducing historical martial arts in universities requires specialised equipment, such as training sabres, protective gear meeting the contemporary requirements for safety and simultaneously being historically accurate alongside with spacious training facilities. Additionally, the practical application of martial arts in educational settings often faces scrutiny due to concerns about general safety and liability.

4. Perceived modern irrelevance. Historical martial arts are sometimes criticized for being archaic and disconnected from modern self-defense needs. This perception may impair their inclusion in physical education programs and often makes it less appealing compared to contemporary combat sports like boxing, MMA, sport fencing etc.

5. Interdisciplinary complexity. Martial arts such as Signum Polonicum, which have deep historical, cultural, and philosophical roots, require interdisciplinary teaching that encompasses history, culture, and physical education (Desveaud, 2024; Sawicki, 2012; Zabłocki, 2011). This poses logistical and pedagogical challenges for academic institutions accustomed to compartmentalised curricula, yet that feature alone might be the biggest strength as it presents synergistic approach to the topic, inducing many activities of purely scientific nature.

Opportunities for development:

1. Cultural heritage preservation. Incorporating historical martial arts into higher education aligns with the broader goal of preserving intangible cultural heritage. Signum Polonicum, for example, not only serves as a combat system but also embodies Polish history, chivalry, and military tradition. Such integration provides students of all the majors, often completely unrelated to martial arts with a deeper understanding of national and global cultural narratives, merging them with advanced scientific developments.

2. Interdisciplinary educational value. Historical martial arts offer opportunities for interdisciplinary studies, combining physical education, history, literature, and cultural studies. For example, the study of Signum Polonicum is directly linked to

courses on military history, European Renaissance and Baroque cultures, or the philosophy of war as seen from the seventeenth century perspective.

3. Promoting diversity in physical education. The inclusion of underrepresented martial arts such as Signum Polonicum diversifies the scope of physical education programs, allowing students to explore unique skill sets beyond mainstream practices. This diversification can enrich the academic experience and attract students with niche interests.

4. Development of soft skills. Martial arts emphasize discipline, focus, respect, and perseverance, which are transferable skills valuable in both academic and professional contexts. Historical martial arts add a dimension of historical and cultural awareness, fostering critical thinking and appreciation for the complexities of human heritage.

5. Global collaboration. Reviving and integrating historical martial arts into academia could foster international collaboration, particularly in research and events such as tournaments or conferences. Signum Polonicum, with its distinct Polish identity, positions Poland as a centre in the promotion of European martial traditions.

6. Alignment with modern trends. The increasing popularity of historical reenactment, live-action role-playing (LARP), and interest in HEMA create a fertile ground for the integration of historical martial arts into mainstream education. Universities could capitalise on this trend by offering specialised programs that appeal to younger generations.

The integration of historical martial arts like Signum Polonicum into university programs could take several forms:

1. Elective courses: offering martial arts as an elective course in physical education, history, or cultural studies departments.

2. Degree specializations: developing specialized degree tracks or certificates in martial arts studies, combining practical training with academic research.

3. Research opportunities: broadening research centers focused on the historical, cultural, and biomechanical aspects of martial arts.

4. Competitive platforms: hosting tournaments, workshops, and exhibitions that blend academic inquiry with practical demonstrations.

5. Partnerships: collaborating with martial arts organizations, museums, and historical societies to provide resources, expertise, and training opportunities.

In summary, the integration of historical martial arts, particularly Signum Polonicum, into higher education institutions offers plethora of both challenges and opportunities. While obstacles such as limited awareness and standardisation need to be addressed foremost, the cultural, educational, and physical benefits of such programs hold immense potential. By embracing historical martial arts, universities can preserve cultural heritage, diversify their curricula, and provide students with a unique and enriching educational experience.

Methodology for the development and integration of historical martial arts into higher education. The proposed methodology for incorporating Historical European Martial Arts (HEMA), including Signum Polonicum, into higher education institutions encompasses a multidisciplinary and systematic approach. This

methodology combines practical training, academic research, and cultural engagement, ensuring that the program is both academically rigorous and practically applicable.

1. *Preliminary research and feasibility study.*

Purpose: to assess the viability of integrating historical martial arts into higher education curricula.

Steps:

- Literature review: analysis of historical texts, martial arts manuals, military orders, memoirs and existing research on HEMA such as various European fencing manuals (Fechtbuchs) and documentation on Signum Polonicum.
- Stakeholder consultation: engage with martial arts practitioners, historians, educators, and students to understand the demand and expectations for such programmes.
- Institutional assessment: identification of universities with relevant resources (for example faculty history, physical education, or cultural studies departments) and assessment of their capacity to incorporate HEMA.

2. *Curriculum development.*

Purpose: to design a comprehensive curriculum combining practical and theoretical components.

Components:

1. Practical training:

- Development of a standardised training syllabus based on historical techniques and weaponry.
- Categorisation of skill levels (e.g. beginner, intermediate, advanced).
- Integration of safety protocols and protective equipment for practical sessions.
- These have already been developed and are implemented on a daily basis in the structures of the Signum Polonicum Associations in a number of centres in Poland, Japan, the Czech Republic and Malaysia.

2. Theoretical modules:

- History and philosophy: study of the historical context, cultural significance, and ethical considerations of martial arts.
- Biomechanics and physics: analysis of movements and techniques using modern scientific methods.
- Pedagogy: instruction on how to teach and promote HEMA with a particular emphasis on Signum Polonicum effectively.

3. Cultural and interdisciplinary studies:

- Connection of HEMA to European and global history, art, and literature.
- Exploration of martial arts as a form of intangible cultural heritage recognised by UNESCO (currently in progress).

3. *Practical implementation.*

Purpose: to establish and conduct training and academic sessions in higher education settings.

Steps:

1. Instructor training:

- Certify qualified instructors in Signum Polonicum and possibly other historical martial arts.

- Collaborate with martial arts organisations to ensure adherence to historical accuracy and safety.

2. Facility setup:

- Equip training spaces with necessary gear (e.g. palcaty, wooden sabres, protective armor, and practice equipment).

Develop digital tools for motion analysis and virtual reality-based training.

3. Student engagement:

- Offer introductory workshops to generate interest.
- Create student clubs focused on HEMA to build community and encourage peer learning.

4. *Research and documentation.*

Purpose: to build a solid academic foundation for HEMA integration.

Steps:

1. Experimental research:

- Analysis of historical weapon techniques using biomechanical studies and motion capture technology.

- Examine the efficacy of HEMA techniques compared to modern martial arts.

2. Interdisciplinary projects:

- Collaboration with historians, linguists, and anthropologists to reconstruct and contextualize techniques.

- Partnerships with engineers to develop modern training tools inspired by historical practices.

3. Publication:

- Encourage students and faculties to publish research papers, creating a broadened repository of knowledge on HEMA.

5. *Cultural promotion and global networking.*

Purpose: to promote Signum Polonicum and related martial arts as part of a global cultural heritage.

Steps:

1. Cultural events:

- Hosting tournaments, exhibitions, and lectures to showcase HEMA.
- Collaboration with museums to display historical artifacts alongside living history demonstrations.

2. International partnerships:

- Work with global HEMA organisations and universities to promote exchanges and joint research.

- Participate in international conferences and UNESCO initiatives to highlight HEMA's cultural significance.

6. *Assessment and feedback.*

Purpose: to evaluate program effectiveness and identify areas for improvement.

Steps:

- Surveys and feedback: collecting input from students, instructors, and stakeholders on the program's impact and areas for enhancement.
- Skill assessment: usage of performance evaluations and certification to track students' progress.
- Programme revision: refining the curriculum and methodology based on findings.

7. *Funding and sustainability.*

Purpose: to secure resources for long-term success.

Steps:

- Grant applications: seeking funding from cultural preservation organisations, education ministries, and private donors.
- Corporate sponsorships: partnership with companies interested in supporting cultural and physical education initiatives.
- Merchandising and branding: development of branded materials, including instructional videos and books, to generate additional income.

Conclusion. The integration of Historical European Martial Arts, with predominant focus on *Signum Polonicum*, into higher education requires a structured methodology that bridges practical skills, academic inquiry, and cultural heritage. By leveraging interdisciplinary approaches and fostering global collaborations, institutions can not only preserve these traditions but also enrich their educational offerings, promoting a deeper comprehension of martial arts as both physical practice and cultural legacy.

Prospects for future research. In the future, it is planned to teach historical European martial arts in higher education institutions in Poland.

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