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Processes of change in academia – the impact of government and market

Abstract: The paper describes the problems associated with the development of universities and higher education on a global scale and based on the example of Poland. To illustrate the subject, the research focuses on: (1) the idea of university autonomy and elitism from a historical and contemporary perspective, (2) the delusion of elitism and social advancement of education which is attributed to it, (3) the myth of flexibility of education generated among others by politicians.

The text indicates the main processes in academia: (1) centuries long removal of the autonomy of universities, (2) the 'humanistic ethos' of universities is also removed, (3) universities are transformed into 'vocational colleges', (4) higher education is developed as one of the service sectors, (5) universities are transformed into institutions responsible for the labour market, (6) universities are entered in the 'logic of the free market', (7), the number of the educated is increasing, (8) the fetishisation of education, (9) the myth of flexibility of education and the its multifunctionality in the context of limited absorption capacity of the labour.

Key words: fetishization of education, development of science, higher education, market, reproduction of labour force

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to present the position of the present universities and academia in the broader context of historical and modern times. The main problems that are described in the text include: (1) the idea of autonomy and elitism of universities in a historical and contemporary perspective, (2) the delusions of elitism of education and social advancement, which are attributed to this, (3) the myth of flexibility of education generated, among others, by politicians. The relations between academia, authority and the market are of significant importance for this analysis.

In consideration of academia, authority and the market are useful concepts taken from the following social scientists: L. Althusser, I. Wallerstein. These two academics drew – to a lesser or greater extent – on the achievements of Marxist thought or developed it in a creative way. For the purposes of this discussion, there are references made in the text, among others, to the concept of the development of academia and academic universalism (Wallerstein, 2007) and the reproduction of the labour force and means of production (Althusser, 2006). These concepts have been used to a greater or lesser extent, and are an inspiration for the synthetic approach which is presented later in the text.

The text does not describe all the problems associated with changes in academia and science. It is rather an attempt to present a critical attitude towards artificially perpetuated

myths associated with universities and higher education. The main myths presented in the text relate to autonomy, independence, elitism and the flexible education paradigm. A negative attitude also applies to the treatment of the university education system as a mechanism for the reproduction of the labour power of a capitalist economy. All these things mean that 'the idea of humanism' as an academic discussion is possible only in the symbolic realm. Upholding the academic tradition of humanistic reflection is becoming yet another myth of the academic community.

Universalism and universities, cultural elitism

The concept of the university

The university primarily meant the general body of teachers and the taught (*Universitas magistrorum et scholarium*). Currently, it is an institution known as a 'higher education' university which combines the functions of teaching and research. Looking for ideas of universities, one can use a variety of sources: China, India, Greece, Constantinople and Western Europe. Whatever the sources of the modern university, the adoption of a functioning structure which was perpetuated by the Western world should be emphasised, which, after I. Wallerstein, can be determined as the beginning of the emergence of a form of universalism in the Western world. The university placed itself ideally in the processes of social change in Europe, where there was a growing demand for people skilled in law, medicine, theology, etc. In addition to the factors which contributed to the institutional development of universities should be included the development of knowledge and awareness of its importance for government and the Church (Pedersen, 2000). Universities and academia, which was the result of their operation, have become elements of the myth of the cultural superiority of the West over other areas. There is no doubt that this superiority was built on the destruction or conquest of other cultures which also represented a high level. This superiority was also connected with the idea of social rationality and learning (Wunderlich, 2003, pp. 301–315; Wallerstein, 2007; Latour, 2011).

Universality and elitism

It is worth referring to the concept of universalism of I. Wallerstein, who introduced the concept to the universally accepted practices and ways of conducting discourse. Universalism is a way of justifying the asymmetric relations of some subjects against each other. In the case of I. Wallerstein, the concept of asymmetry is the paternalistic relation of the 'civilised world' to the 'uncivilised world', which manifests itself in contemptuous rhetoric and a policy based on the belief of the superiority of beliefs held (Wallerstein, 2007, p. 11). Modern universalism takes various forms, but the mechanisms to enforce them have not changed for centuries. I. Wallerstein includes in the main forms of modern universalism:

- 1) consolidation of human rights and democracy,
- 2) the a priori assumption of the superiority of the so-called 'civilised world', and
- 3) economic liberalism (Wallerstein, 2007, p. 12).

A negative form of universality is European universality, which took various forms – (1) the right to intervene in the ‘non-civilised world’, (2) the essentialist particularism of Orientalism, (3) the universality of learning. For this work, the most important thing is the universality of learning, which was formed in the nineteenth century and increased its dominance after 1945 (Wallerstein, 2007, p. 59). As in the case of human rights, also in the case of learning an assumption of universality was adopted. However, the assignment of objectivity to ‘learning’ and rational methods did not correspond to the existence of a variety of different particularisms i.e. national, racial differences, etc. One of the processes in the development of academia was the division into what can be explained and what can be understood, which is expressed in the settled bipolar epistemological division (i.e. *two cultures*) (Snow, 2001; Kimball, 1994).

According to I. Wallerstein, scientific universalism along with liberalism and racist-sexist practices has become an important element of the *capitalist world-economy* (Wallerstein, 2007, p. 68). However, the university as an institution and structure of knowledge is responsible for the legitimacy of other segments, such as politics and the economy. The structure of knowledge of the ‘civilised world’ is reflected in the modern university system, the already mentioned bipolar epistemological-methodological division, and the specific role of social science (Wallerstein, 2007, p. 73).

The modern university system broke with the structure of the medieval universities as a legacy of the Catholic Church. According to I. Wallerstein, the process was accompanied by the loss of prominence of universities in the production and reproduction of knowledge, which may be disputable. It seems, however, that universities retained some elements of the medieval institutions, which is reflected in the patronage relationship between employees and the symbolism of elitism, which is supported by the academic community and authorities (Bourdieu, 1988). According to I. Wallerstein, the modern university is characteristic of a specific institutionalisation (bureaucracy), which serves to implement a career, topped with receiving degrees (Wallerstein, 2007, p. 74).

In the mid-twentieth century, the operation of the ‘new universities’ became a model, which was taken over by the periphery. Significant economic growth resulted in the increased demand for staff who could facilitate the management of political-economic institutions. In this situation, the elitism of universities could not be kept, which was expressed in the commercialisation and universality of schools. According to I. Wallerstein, large numbers of students caused a lowering of the level of teaching in higher education, since the lack of a sufficient number of researchers prevented the provision of educational needs at the same level as before.

I. Wallerstein drew attention to two mutually intertwined processes – the development of academia and the development of the capitalist economy. The result of this was the need to legitimise academia in terms of its effectiveness and suitability for the economy, since this was the only way to gain support of the government. Academics (representatives of the nomothetic sciences), to legitimise themselves, alluded to the social impact of scientific activities such as inventions. Another determinant of the position of the nomothetic scientists was their adoption of rational scientific methods based on empirical and verifiable methods, which was beyond the reach of the humanities. According to I. Wallerstein, social sciences also had to become ‘subservient’ to the capitalist econ-

omy-world, because that was the only way they could gain the institutional support. Applied social sciences gave better technologies of governance and social control. Through 'objective' quantitative and qualitative studies they became an important element in the interpretation of social reality and legitimacy of political actions. Learning had to be characterised by efficiency in the economic (profit), or in the political sphere (increasing the possibility of social control).

Profit became the starting point for research. Therefore it can be said that research directions are determined not by the real needs of society, but the ability to sell a specific product. According to I. Wallerstein, the transformation of education reduces the importance of the authority, the strongest European universalism – the universality of learning. At this point, one might consider whether authority is at all necessary, because, really, the learning standards developed in the Western world have been taken over by the peripheral areas. The commercialisation and standardisation of research can be considered as a strong current, starting the transformations in the structure of knowledge, and thus *the Modern World-System*. It seems that greater access to knowledge and the technical ability to disseminate knowledge are of significant importance, and in this case, one would agree with the fact that the era of medieval universities is over. This state of affairs is not due to any weakening of the authority of knowledge structures, but rather to the undermining of the position of the researchers themselves – perhaps this is not the case in the natural sciences, but certainly in the humanities and social sciences. There can be observed a reduction of the role of scientists-observers of social life as teachers and guides. However, representatives of the applied social sciences have become needed to legitimise political actions or to certify social facts.¹ Another result of the commercialisation of academia will be the ability to make the externalisation of the costs of research and teaching activities, for example by moving different types of research activities to other areas of the world.

Autonomy and elitism

Historical perspective

In Europe, universities achieved their autonomy and operational position by manoeuvring between the differing interests of the medieval feudal, municipal and ecclesiastical authorities. One could say that European universities made, primarily, an act of emancipation from the church, and later, it was mainly owing to the church that they acquired their privileged position in relation to the state structures. However, the protection of the church caused that from the thirteenth century, universities became an extension of ecclesiastical institutions, particularly as far as the question of the status of teachers and curriculum control are concerned. On the other hand, certain dynamics of the development of education meant that universities could acquire a significant position even as re-

¹ The "debates truly false and falsely true" collaboration in the media and fast-thinkers, in: P. Bourdieu (2009), *On Television. The reign of journalism*, PWN, Warszawa, pp. 37–101.

gards church authorities, as exemplified by the development of the Bologna school in the field of civil law (Le Goff, 1997, pp. 73–149). Universities could effectively look after their own business and strengthen their position due to the fact that they possessed goods that became socially valuable. One could say that these goods were knowledge in various fields of social life. Some of the universities were nothing but think tanks, supporting one of the structures of power, or they served as an agent ‘selling’ knowledge. For the church, control over knowledge decided its position regarding discourse which cast doubts on religious dogmas; however, for developing countries universities became breeding grounds for human resources, as well as an intellectual support for rivalry with the church. Therefore, it can be said that universities were not free from politics, but rather they actively participated in it.

Their efficient dealing with conflicts of interest meant that university structures became increasingly institutionalised, not differing in this respect from corporations or guilds. With the dynamics of the development of academia in Europe, we had to deal with the dynamics of the internal development of universities. The growing importance of universities in society meant that university staff attained a significant position in the social hierarchy, which was one of the ways of social advancement. The importance of the position of universities in society was reinforced by the ethos of elitism which was preserved, either as a fact or as a myth, artificially maintained by the same university structures or the structures of the state, wishing to maintain the illusion of autonomy and prestige. The dynamics of the development of academia and the socio-economic transformation led to various university forms (e.g., private institutions, state universities); however, one thing which has not changed is the delusion of elitism and a desire to keep it in the symbolic sphere.

The modern perspective

Currently, it is difficult to speak of any university autonomy, moreover, universities have begun to have an ancillary role to the economy, which is reflected in the need to produce employees with relevant competences. This state of affairs has very little in common with the ‘humanist ethos’ of the university. In general, the ‘humanist ethos’ has become too elitist for the society and the state. ‘Humanism’ is associated with inefficiency and irrationality. Universities have gone from an idea to the praxis of humanism, which places a requirement for them to shift to the position of ‘vocational schools’ in order to be able to adequately produce workers for the market economy. It could be said that universities have been brought to an ancillary role, what is more – maintaining the convention of the free market – they have become responsible for the mismatch of competencies of graduates to the requirements of employers. It is no exaggeration to claim that countries which could not cope with their own social and economic policies have found an entity which could be jointly responsible for the lack of tools which could shape the market. Anyway, the very idea of interference in the free market – with the current and probably long since prevailing liberal discourse – would be not acceptable to those in power. The only paradigm addressed in the discussion on higher education comes down to how to change universities so that ‘they are good for the market’. One may say that in this discussion there are not enough questions ‘of the market’, i.e. how to change the market and the principle

of its operation to serve the people, not only to meet the basic demand and supply relationship. The lack of such a discourse is due to two things: (1) the dominance of the liberal paradigm in socio-economic life, and (2) the weakness and indolence of the state in relation to capital.

The state can justify itself, rejecting the claims of the precariat² concerning the ability to secure a decent life. However, the state is responsible for maintaining the myth that is associated with the functioning of current market mechanisms – the illusion of flexible education or flexibility itself. The actual need for flexibility is not denied here, but the creation of the myth of the multifunctionality and flexible modes of study does not provide safety to graduates. This is due precisely to those market dynamics which cannot be predicted, something which is especially visible in the negative effects of the financial crisis of 2008. Building higher education reforms in a narrow time horizon is only the conservative action of politicians who are moving away from their responsibilities for social and economic policy, arguing that ‘the market is to blame’, that ‘this is the way the market works’, that ‘such is the logic of the market’, that ‘the market acts rationally’. Using the argument that ‘the market acts rationally’ means that all other players who want to polemicise with that face a losing battle. Blaming universities for the lack of flexibility is also an attempt to place universities in the ‘logic of the free market’. It should be noted that the barriers to flexibility were established by the state itself, which did not allow universities to create a simple system of faculties and programs – as in the case of Polish universities during the first decade of the twenty-first century.

The flexibility myth also applies to the adoption of the three-level system of higher education – Bachelor’s, Master’s and PhD studies. The fact is that the introduction of 3-year Bachelor (so-called first degree) facilitates a rapid response to the changing requirements of employers in the labour market. However, there is only one reservation – the demand for educated people. The problem is that markets of EU member states are not prepared for the present number of educated people. Therefore, the idea of flexibility which is being supported – otherwise correct as a rule – does not work in reality. It is unseemly for politicians to say that educated people are useless, instead, they prefer to perpetuate the myth of education in general and the myth of flexibility, which is part of the logic of the liberal discourse which reproduces the vision of a successful individual. This results in resentment among young, educated people, for whom there is a lack of prospects for professional development and occupying higher social positions. This process is also seen at PhD level, the universality of which means that it loses its importance and the alumni join the precariat group.

² The term *precariat* is a neologism, which was created as a merger of the words *uncertain* and *proletariat*. It is to define a social group whose life situation is characterised by a high degree of uncertainty and lack of predictability. In the context of developed societies, the term *precariat* refers to a social group/class which does not have a stable social or existential situation (under-employment, employment in the so-called ‘junk contracts’, lack of work, etc.). See: G. Standing (2011), *The Precariat. The New Dangerous Class*, Bloomsbury, London; J. Sowa, *What is precariat?*, <http://ha.art.pl/prezentacje/39-edufactory/1655-jan-owl-what-it-is-prekariat.html>, 3.03.2012; F. Berardi, *Info-Labour and Precarisation*, <http://www.generation-online.org/t/tinfolabour.htm>, 3.03.2012.

Delusion of elitism and promotion

The global perspective

Myths of flexibility are failing because market (including the labour market) barriers cannot be eliminated purely by means of flexible forms of education and skills. This stems from the fact that there are more efficient mechanisms of the capitalist system to generate additional value and from the need to function in the market economies of developed countries. This necessity means that one cannot totally externalise labour costs; however, to increase efficiency, employers focus on forcing a system of employment and labour production in accordance with their own needs and as is convenient for them. L. Althusser wrote that in order to maintain a particular social formation it is necessary to ensure the material conditions of production (reproduction of the conditions of production). As part of the reproduction L. Althusser emphasised the reproduction of the means of production and productive forces. Labour was of significant importance, and was a material condition of the labour force. Pay was the subject of rivalry between capitalists and the labour force, which was expressed in the amount of minimum wages demanded.

The problem which needs to be emphasised applies to the existence of differences of opinion concerning the level of material resources sufficient to live on. However, in view of the capitalist economy, there is a problem with protecting a sufficient level of resources for the reproduction of the labour force. These problems are increasing in relation to the dynamics of the capitalist economy, i.e. in relation to the externalisation of labour costs outside developed countries, or in connection with the desire to reduce the wealth distribution policy. In this context, the ideology of the capitalist economy is strengthened by defining the concepts of rationality and efficiency.³ The economy needs a diverse and educated workforce; however, the global market is able to draw on considerable human resources. In addition, the capitalist economy is not able to solve the problem of over-production of certain qualifications – and it is not required to do so, especially as it uses the cheap labour ‘produced’ in this way. The low level of financial security of successive educated generations causes wages to stop at the minimum level, i.e. one which guarantees the reproduction of the labour force, but does not give a sense of a decent life.

Reproduction of the labour force can also occur through the system of higher education, which is reflected in changes in the entire world, and moving away from university education as a right and treating it as a service which is subject to the laws of the market. The consequences may not be visible in the short term, however, a departure from the humanist vision of a university education can cause a loss of reflection on the ethics and aesthetics of social life. Maintaining the paradigm of efficiency and economic rationality, reproduced by a specific educational system (at various levels) will lead to the development of something which was previously described as *homo economicus*. For a capitalist economy to keep the formula of *homo economicus*, it is helpful to consolidate the myth of the individual, who, owing to his/her competences is able to climb the social ladder,

³ On the reduction of the concepts of rationality and capitalism also: S. Amin (2007), *The Liberal Virus: Permanent War and the Americanization of the World*, IW KiP, Warszawa.

which nowadays is difficult, but is in line with the liberal concept of justice.⁴ In this situation, a vicious circle of low wages and the hope of social advancement is created, resulting in the temporary relief of dissatisfaction concerning the distribution of wealth in society and the continuous reproduction of educated people.

The large supply of educated people facilitates the pressure and enforcement of changes placed by the economy on politicians. However, politicians have a big problem with maintaining the myth of education as a mechanism for improving social position, which would be consistent with the spirit of an ostensible egalitarianism in the system of liberal democracy. Barriers in the labour market even further exacerbate social stratification, and awareness of the stratification causes the frustration of successive younger generations who are better educated, which, however, does not mean that the 'start in life' is easier for them. The results of these processes are becoming increasingly visible in grass-roots movements which attack the basis of the liberal governance – for example, the May 15 Movement or more broadly the Outraged Movement. These movements contest the asymmetrical economic power relations between society and corporations, which is expressed in the slogan used during protests, "We are 99%."

On 15th October, 2011, in over 950 cities and 80 countries around the world there were representatives of the Outraged Movement coming to the streets. The movement began to bring together young people excluded by the form of social system. The movement is critical of the situation on the labour market, the position of workers and the social costs paid by ordinary people for the 'rational' financial policy which was introduced by those entities which shared the responsibility for the global crisis. The quintessence of the demands are the words of the founder of the WikiLeaks portal – J. P. Assange, who took part in the demonstrations of the 'outraged' on 15th October, 2011. J. P. Assange referred to the accusations against breaking the law by protesters: "This movement does not intend to break the law, but wants a new law to be constructed" (CNN, PAP, 15th October, 2011).

In various member states of the EU the protest also became an opportunity to present demands against cuts in spending on higher education and public education, as well as against rising tuition fees (e.g. Spain and the United Kingdom). Also of importance was the situation in Chile in 2011, where students voted for free education and went on strike and occupied the universities. The example is meaningful because, in contrast to European countries, economic growth in Chile is significant, however, the social unrest (including student unrest) is directed against the unjust distribution of wealth. The strike by students represents a turning point in social discourse, because the Chilean higher education system became a reproduction structure of significant social inequalities – the fight for free education became a symbol of the struggle against social injustice (Stasiński, 2011). There was also a considerable opposition of young people in Israel, where, on 3rd September, 2011, there was the largest demonstration in the history of the country, and about 400,000 people came onto the streets. D. Leef became the icon of the movement, and was even visited by D. Cohn-Bendit – one of the leading figures of the revolts in the late 1960s (Jeffay, 2011; *In Praise...*, 2011). The protests in Israel related more to the

⁴ A broader analysis of the impact of neoliberalism on the education system, among others in: *The Neo-classical Entanglement Education*, eds. E. Potulicka, J. Rutkowiak, Impulse, Kraków 2010.

equitable distribution of wealth and of what might be called a participatory budget. The student rebellion (also known as the revolt of tents) was directed against the living conditions of the young generation, for whom studying and working leaves them unable to provide the basics of living.

It is clear that a system of social openness is no longer sufficient to maintain the socio-political order. The system as a whole is beginning to lose balance due to the fact that wide openness in the social sphere (e.g. in the area of morals) no longer provides a counterbalance to actual economic disparities. It turns out that the old socialist postulates are appearing in a new historical context. The state basically became a guarantor of property, but it is no longer able to mitigate the inequalities which result from the ownership of property. This implies that the so-called recognition policy, being a kind of discharge valve of social claims, no longer fulfils its purpose, and the denial of the problems associated with the redistribution policy sooner or later may cause social unrest (such as the social unrest in Spain in 2011).⁵ Of course, this includes EU member states, where the demands for pluralism of group identity will drive the dynamics of political life, which is due to the dominance of certain traditional awareness or something which might be described as a political culture (e.g. Poland).

Moreover, it must be noted that the state is not able to perform its public functions, which means that through commercialisation of the spheres of its current activities it is trying to avoid responsibility. This situation can be observed in the commercialisation of all university activities and the development of a public paid education system. Another problem is the crisis of the idea of socio-political representation in decision-making bodies, which means that many social groups are contesting the representation system based on the impact of big capital. An example of this position is the publication by L. Lessig, which indicates the separation of the American political system from the citizen; moreover, Lessig points out that the policy is based on a system of quasi-corrupt lobby groups. His book became an intellectual support to the protesters occupying Wall Street in 2011 (Lessig, 2011).

It is noteworthy that one of the symbols of the Outraged Movement became a mask referring to an image of Guy Fawkes, who was one of those responsible for the so-called gunpowder plot in 1605.⁶ In popular culture, the characteristic mask was created by A. Moore, creator of the comic *V for Vendetta* and the movie of the same name, the screenplay for which was written by the Wachowski brothers and A. Moore. The film touches upon many topics, but the main motives concern revenge on a totalitarian political system and the relationship between freedom and the omnipotence of the state. That mask of the main character (or V) can be regarded as a metaphor for the idea. It is also expressed by one of the sentences which V says in the film: "Under the mask there is something more than just the body ... Under the hood lies an idea, Mr. Creedy, and ideas are bulletproof."

⁵ The problem of the recognition of the relationship between recognition policy and the policy of redistribution in: N. Fraser, *Social justice in the age of identity politics*, in: *Redistribution or recognition? Political debate – philosophical*, eds. N. Fraser, A. Honneth, DSzWE TWP, Wrocław 2005, pp. 27–110.

⁶ The gunpowder plot concerned an attempt to blow up English King James I and the government in the House of Commons.

The Polish perspective

An analysis of the problems of the Polish higher education system should begin with the changes associated with the collapse of the socialist state system. Even then, we had to deal with the adoption of certain assumptions, the effects of which are now being intensified. With the transition to a new political system, i.e. from a system of people's democracy to a system of liberal democracy, there was a thoughtless acquisition of modernisation. With this process, as far as universities are concerned, we had to deal with a gentle transition from the paradigms of socialist thought to the liberal paradigm – especially in the social sciences. The relatively smooth transition resulted, among others, from opportunism, both in the previous and in the current systems. It should be noted that the need for systemic change was real, however, the adoption of the paradigm of economisation of many spheres of social life brought negative consequences. A good example of entering into the new structure of the capitalist economy, without addressing the deeper social problems, is the instrumental approach to higher education. This instrumentalism is illustrated by the thesis presented by A. W. Nowak, who characterised the main problems of higher education in relation to the perpetuation of the class divisions (Nowak, pp. 117–131). Nowak's key points are:

- 1) The claim that sciences in general and the social sciences in particular began to legitimise the neoliberal narrative of the social reality.
- 2) The claim that the higher education system began to replace the social assistance system by absorbing the unemployed.
- 3) The claim that by maintaining the myth of the individual – a man of success, people are able to overcome other social barriers.
- 4) The claim that the higher education system served as an instrument of pacification of potential class discontent.

In the Polish case, there was a profound identification of university education with social advancement, which for a long time was a mechanism of social dynamics, even during communism. With the saturation of the market with educated people, higher education lost its function of improving social status, however, a university education maintained the status of a social minimum which must be completed to be able to function in the labour market.⁷ It is no exaggeration to say that there was a kind of fetishisation of education, i.e. it was important to have a degree, however, it does not necessarily go hand in hand with the relevant competences.⁸ Legitimising oneself with diplomas of certain faculties still is, at least symbolically, an expression of prestige, and thus a kind of elitism and potential social advancement. Of course, there are fields of study which basically provide employment and are associated with substantial real social prestige, such as medical studies – but such cases are not numerous.

⁷ Similarly, the situation of the depreciation of higher education due to its ubiquity is discussed by a Chinese author X. Biao. See. X. Biao, *Social production hierarchy. What can we do with it? Notes from Asia*, www.ha.art.pl, 20.10.2011.

⁸ The reference to the Marxist concept of commodity fetishism in the context of education, in: T. Veblen (2008), *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Muza SA, Warszawa, pp. 305–336.

Poor labour market conditions (the lack of development perspectives of various sectors with a high level of absorption of human resources) meant that a university education by itself is no longer a mechanism facilitating a rise in the social hierarchy. For example, at the end of 2011, the unemployment rate among young people in Poland amounted to 24.9% (data for the second quarter of 2011 according to Eurostat). The authorities at that time did not present any real solutions to change this state – indeed the situation in many EU member states was equally unsatisfactory; for example, in Spain the unemployment rate for young people was at that time more than 41%. Calculations based on data from the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs showed that the unemployment in the third quarter of 2011 among those in the range of 18 to 24 years of age was 21.56%, while in the range of 25 to 34 years of age, it was 29.44%. However, it should be noted that people with higher education degrees accounted for 11.4% of the unemployed in general, but their situation was better as compared to less educated people – people with a vocational education accounted for 27.4% of the unemployed, those with a lower secondary education – 27.1%, and with a higher secondary education – 22.7%.⁹ It should be noted, however, that people who legitimise themselves with a higher education degree are also mobile, and account for a large percentage of labour migration within the EU. This situation is also used by the Polish service sector, which demands a flexible attitude, as well as the use of ‘soft skills’ characteristic of educated people.

A large percentage of students in Poland (which at this time has no equivalent in Western Europe) is supported by the perpetuation of the myths of elitism and flexibility of the education of graduates. T. Veblen wrote that, with the start of studies (granting mass) we also deal with consolidation of mediocrity and mingler. The process which T. Veblen pointed out is also the cause of the inability to maintain the symbolism of the elite universities. However, that failure does not affect the rhetoric of the authorities responsible for sovereignty over the realm of higher education (Veblen, pp. 305–336).

It should be noted that higher education in Poland has lost the status of ‘preference’, which results from its ubiquity, and the broad access to it at a relatively low cost (compared to other developed countries) due to the unexpected development of higher vocational schools and private colleges. The effects of the development of this system over the last two decades are the following: (1) making the higher education sector a service sector, (2) making the higher education system a social policy support system, (3) the lack of a development strategy for Polish university education, (4) a debatable level of education, due to universal access to it, (5) education of graduates in far greater numbers than the labour market can absorb, (6) maintaining the myth of flexibility of education as the sole means for changing the needs of the labour market, (7) maintaining the symbolic myth of the elitism of the higher education system, (8) a kind of alienation of labour (students in the area of their education, university staff in terms of their academic work).

⁹ Calculated on the basis of statistical analysis entitled *Structural Statistics, November 2011* (Public Employment Service), <http://www.psz.praca.gov.pl/>, 30.12.2011.

Dynamics of changes in the higher education system in Poland

It should be emphasised that the trend of significant increases in the number of participants in the higher education system (in different study systems) since the early 1990s has ended. There was a noticeable decrease in the total number of study participants in the academic year 2006/2007 – for the first time in over 15 years. At the same time, there was no decrease in the number of university graduates, as the increasing trend continued from the 1990s until 2011. There is also an upward trend in the number of PhD students (see Figures 1, 2 and 3).

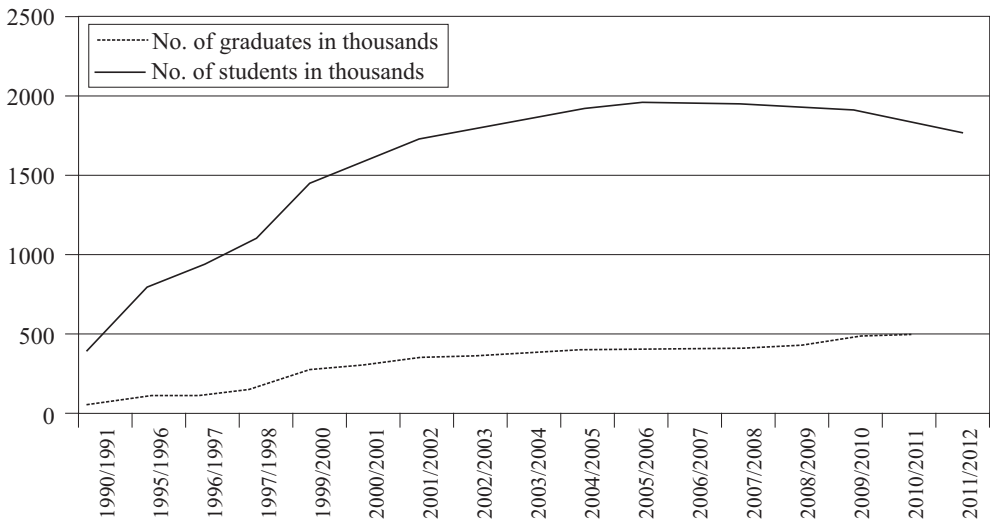


Figure 1. The number of participants and graduates of higher education (university level)

Source: Own study based on CSO data.

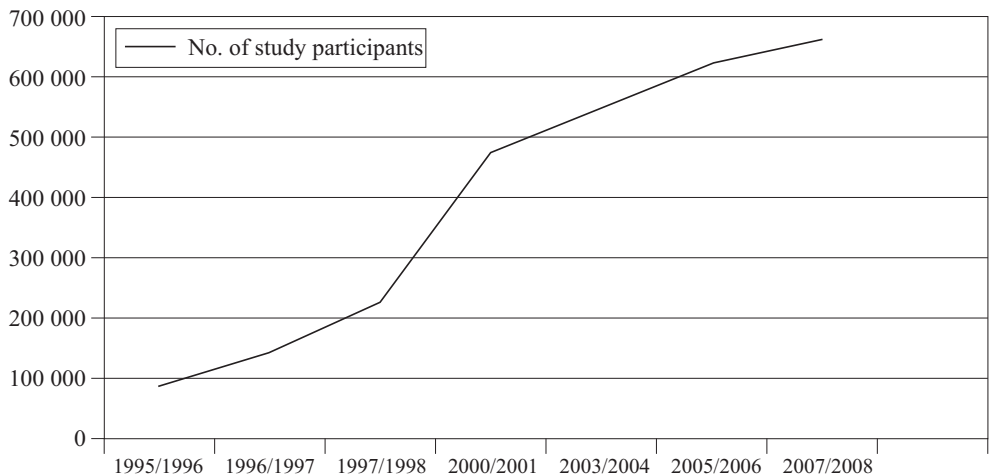


Figure 2. Number of participants in higher education in private universities

Source: Own study based on CSO data.

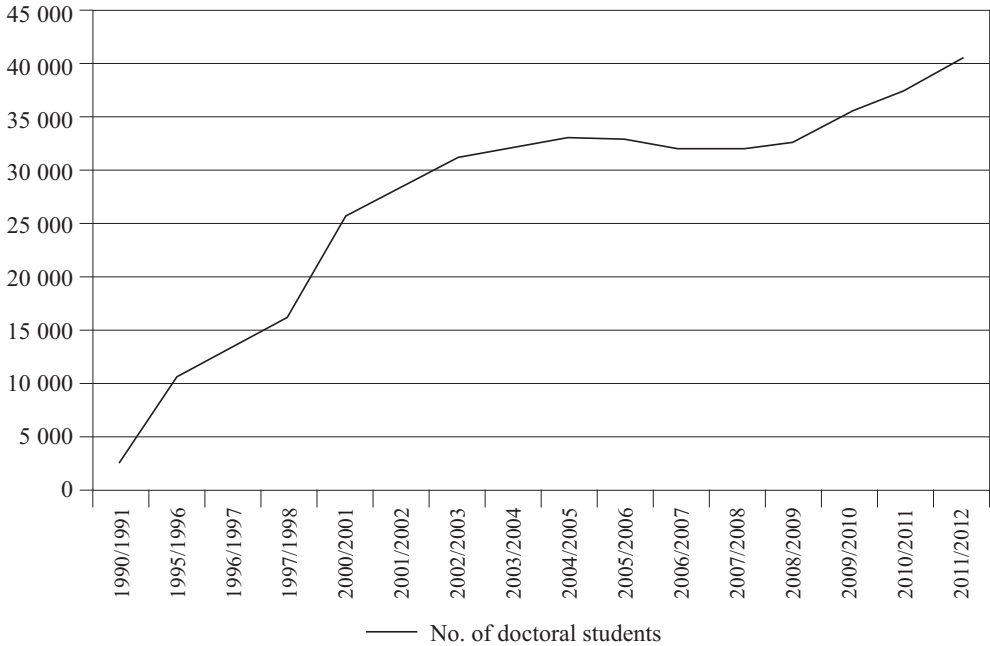


Figure 3. PhD students

Source: Own study based on CSO data.

Also characteristic of the Polish market was the educational growth of non-state higher education institutions. For example, in the academic year 1995/1996 there were 80 (of which more than half were higher universities of economics). Over the next three years, the number of non-state higher education institutions increased to 146 (of which approximately 60% were higher economic universities, approximately 16.5% were colleges with a ‘university profile’, while 7% were higher pedagogical universities). The most numerous non-public institutions have been and still are universities of economics (not including vocational colleges).¹⁰ For example, in 2008 there were 324 private universities, of which 157 were vocational colleges,¹¹ 90 were universities of economics and 11 were pedagogical universities (see Figure 4).¹²

In the case of the dynamic development and restructuring of the Polish economy in the 1990s, economic fields of study significantly responded to the needs of the labour market, but in the course of time, the graduates of such courses as management and marketing had a significant problem finding a job. The same applies to such fields as political science and education, but in these cases, attention should be paid to the ratio of the unemployed to the number of educated people in these fields of study. In this respect, the situation and the proportions do not correspond to the critical ratio of mismatches to market demand. It

¹⁰ Calculations based on the CSO data.

¹¹ Established on the basis of the Act of 26th June 1997 on *vocational colleges* (“Journal of Laws”, no. 96, item 590, as amended).

¹² Data from the CSO.

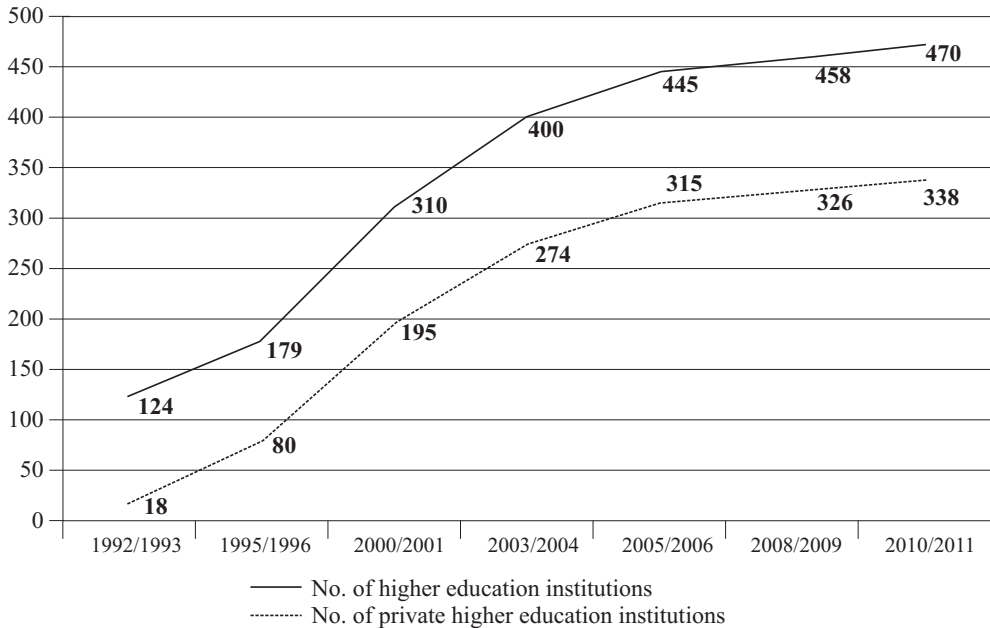


Figure 4. Total number of universities and private universities

Source: Own study based on data from the Central Statistical Office and Ministry.

should be noted that people with social competence, which can be generated by the aforementioned fields of study, can generally work in the service sector. Individual segments of the services market which dominate in the creation of added value are trade and real estate, followed by transport and communications, and public administration.¹³ In the case of trade, the employment of some graduates may not match their ambitions. In the case of public administration we are dealing with a limited ability to absorb graduates, which may result from the general trend of the lack of growth of administration in Poland in recent years. Working in the public administration does not have to be associated with high salaries, but has a high level of job security, which, in the context of an unstable economic situation, is a much appreciated value.

Many analysts points to the unfavourable structure of degree courses taken by the students, which affects the mismatch of graduates to the labour market. One can be critical of this kind of argument, because it assumes that universities serve only to produce a labour force for the economy. However, it should be noted that there is a trend towards the implementation of universities in the logic of liberal economy, as exemplified by the reform of higher education prepared in 2011. Politicians have generally lost the possibility to mould the labour market effectively, which results in legislative changes which *de facto* transform universities into ‘vocational schools’. Universities have become governmental institutions to support the public policy of the state.

¹³ Cf. J. Hybel, *Miejsce i rola sektora usług w rozwoju gospodarczym Polski w latach 1995–2004*, “Zeszyty Naukowe Ekonomika i Organizacja Gospodarki Żywnościowej” 2006, no. 2, pp. 5–12.

Another issue concerns the significant increase in the number of university students – for example in the academic year 1990/1991 there were 403,000, while in 2007/2008 there were already 1,930,000, which indicates a great ‘achievement of political change’.¹⁴ This ‘success’ might be impressive if we take into account the fact that the expenditure per student which was directed to the universities was three, or even four times lower compared with some EU countries.¹⁵ This ‘production’ of graduates took place without any strategy or government plans, which must have affected among others (1) lower quality of education, (2) free development of individual private universities, (3) significant recruitment for popular fields of study, with the absence of mechanisms to promote less popular areas.

There is no doubt that, at the beginning, private universities did not have their own research facilities and human resources, and engineering, sciences, medicine, etc. were connected with high costs, so the best economic project in the 1990s were universities which were based in the fields of economics, humanities, social sciences and education. As a result of under-funding, the education system fostered the multi-employment of academics, which obviously had to have a negative effect on the quality of education in public and private institutions.

The analysis of statistical data on trends in the number of students in particular fields of studies can be difficult, due to the reclassification of ISCED (International Standard Classification of Education). In addition, the previously indicated dynamic increase in the number of students in Poland must be considered here.

In the academic year 1990/1991, in Poland there were over 400,000 students, of whom nearly 17% were taking technical courses, 14.2% courses in the field of education, 13.2% in the fields of business and management, 11.4% in the humanities, 4.7% in the field of law, 4.3% in the social sciences, 2.3% in the fields of mathematics and IT.¹⁶

In the academic year 1997/1998, in Poland there were 1,091,000 students out of which 23.8% were in the fields of business and management, 17.5% in technical fields, 13.8% in the field of education, 11.7% in the social sciences, 8.5% in the humanities, 4.9% in the field of law, 1.8% in the fields of mathematics and IT.¹⁷

In the academic year 2007/2008, in Poland there were 1,930,000 students out of which 22.9% were in the economic and administrative fields, 13.9% in the social sciences, 12% in the fields of education, 8.8% in the humanities, 6.8% in engineering and technical fields, 4.9% in the field of IT, 3% in the field of law, 1.5% in the field of physics, 0.8% in the fields of mathematics and statistics.¹⁸

¹⁴ The phrase “one of the achievements of Polish political changes” was, among others, used in the study on the statistical website of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education entitled “Statistical Data on Higher Education” (<http://www.nauka.gov.pl>), <http://www.nauka.gov.pl/szkolnictwo-wyzsze/dane-statystyczne-o-szkolnictwie-wyzszym/>, 20.12.2011.

¹⁵ Data from MNiSW (Ministry of Science and Higher Education).

¹⁶ Calculations based on the CSO data. The data do not include all fields of study. Percentages are rounded to the first decimal.

¹⁷ Calculations based on the CSO data. The data do not include all fields of study. Percentages are rounded to the first decimal.

¹⁸ Calculations based on the CSO data. The data do not include all fields of study. Percentages are rounded to the first decimal.

The data from the period 1990–2008 shows that there was a strengthening of interest in the fields of economic studies, followed by the education and social studies. If we add up the number of students from the period 2007/2008 in the fields of physics, information technology, mathematics, statistics and engineering or technology it turns out that the group of these students represents 14.1% of all students in that period. However, if we add up the students from the humanities, social sciences and journalism (journalism and information), their share in the total number of students amounts to 23.7%. Students in the field of education alone constitute 12% of all students. One can also add up the students in the fields of nature, agriculture and the life sciences (biological, environmental, agricultural, forestry, fishing-related, medical and veterinary) – 11.3% (only medical trends – 5.8%).¹⁹

Conclusion

The article discusses the problem of the transformation of universities and higher education on a global scale as well as in Poland. The Polish situation is interesting, since the reforms made in the education system reflect the hasty transformation in the logic of economic efficiency. Many of the changes made in 2011 are necessary, however, they have been carried out without deeper reflection on the state of the entire higher education system, previous institutional arrangements, differences in individual disciplines, etc. Another distinctive feature of the reforms in Poland is the lack of a real debate and public consultation with the academic community about the scope of the changes (though the problem applies not only to this case). This is due to the problem of the weakness of the academic community as the subject of public consultation and the low standards of political culture represented by authority. This results in passivity and a lack of organisation of the academic and student communities against the reforms introduced by the government. In the Polish case, there has been no active opposition to the legislative changes in the field of education, or even labour laws, such as could be observed, for example, in France in 1976 (resistance to the Act of A. Saunier-Seite), 1986 (strike against Devaquet Act), 1994 (demonstrations against CIP) or 2006 (demonstrations against the CPE).

The text analyses the university system in the areas of autonomy, elitism, delusion of social advancement and the myth of flexibility of education. The starting point for the analysis is the idea of the university (historical and present perspective) and universalism (I. Wallerstein). The overlapping processes of the development of the capitalist economy and academia are also mentioned. As a result of the symbiosis of economy and learning, there arose the necessity of the latter to legitimise itself in terms of its effectiveness and usefulness to the economy. In addition, the consolidation of the liberal democracy paradigm fostered the adoption of the assumption of the efficiency of academia in the political realm.

One can point to specific processes associated with modern academia and the university system: (1) elimination of the autonomy of universities, (2) removing the ‘humanistic

¹⁹ Calculations based on the CSO data. The data do not include all fields of study. Percentages are rounded to the first decimal.

ethos' of universities, (3) transformation of universities into 'vocational colleges', (4) development of higher education as a service sector, (5) transformation of universities into institutions responsible for the labour market, (6) including universities in the 'logic of the free market', (7) increase of the numbers of educated people, (8) fetishisation of education, (9) perpetuating the myth of flexibility of education and its multifunctionality in a context of limited absorption capacity of the labour market, (10) development of tuition fees in public education.

The issues discussed in the paper are only a representation of the issues related to higher education and universities. There is no doubt that many of the processes referred to in the text should be further analysed, which is due to the dynamics of these processes and the extensive recognition of the subject (including the issues of autonomy, elitism, flexibility, conflicts of interest, power).

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Streszczenie

Procesy zmian w nauce – wpływ władzy i rynku

W tekście podjęto problematykę związaną z rozwojem uniwersytetów i szkolnictwa wyższego w wymiarze globalnym i na przykładzie Polski. Dla zobrazowania podjętego problemu skupiono się na: (1) idei autonomii i elitaryzmu uczelni w perspektywie historycznej i współczesnej, (2) ułudzie elitaryzmu wykształcenia i awansu społecznego jaki się jemu przypisuje, (3) micie elastyczności wykształcenia generowanego m.in. przez polityków.

W tekście wskazano na główne procesy zachodzące w nauce: (1) z wiekami następowało znoszenie autonomii uniwersytetów, (2) usuwany jest "humanistyczny etos" uniwersytetów, (3) uniwersytety przekształcane są w "wyższe szkoły zawodowe", (4) szkolnictwo wyższe rozwijane jest jako jeden z sektorów usług, (5) uniwersytety przekształcane są w instytucje odpowiedzialne za rynek pracy, (6) uniwersytety wpisywane są w "logikę działania wolnego rynku", (7) wzrasta liczba wykształconych, (8) następuje fetyszyzacja wykształcenia, (9) podtrzymywany jest mit elastyczności wykształcenia i wielokierunkowości w kontekście ograniczonej chłonności rynku pracy, (10) rozwijane są systemy odpłatności za studia w szkolnictwie publicznym.

Słowa kluczowe: fetyszyzacja edukacji, rozwój nauki, szkolnictwo wyższe, rynek, reprodukcja siły roboczej