

# POLISH REFORM OF HIGHER EDUCATION: "OPERATION WAS SUCCESSFUL AND PATIENT IS DEAD"

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Poland just like several other countries has been touched by dynamic changes in Higher Education (HE). These changes are a consequence of factors that are both external (globalization and EU politics) and internal (transformation post-1989 and demography). Following a global tendency, the increase of access to University made spectacular development. After the installation of a free market economy, we witnessed fast changes: former public university system (free of charges but with the selection at the entrance) was complemented by private high schools and paid studies at public universities. All this new business constitutes a precious source of income for these institutions. If before 1989, only about 7% of the population graduated with a degree (second level of HE), now almost 50% of young people are "clients" of the HE system. But the boom or even the "fashion" for studying is now gone. [On the one hand this is because the fear of obligatory military service is no longer a factor for entering university since the service became professionalized; on the other hand the number of unemployed university graduates provoke the partial loss of trust in HE as a solution to unemployment]. However, the major factor for the decrease in the number of students is demography.

Until today, both categories of colleges/universities live in a symbiotic way. Underpaid faculty from public universities survive thanks to their parallel positions at private schools. On the other hand, the private schools are able to work thanks to the knowledge and professional capital (titles of professors) of public faculty working for them. The faculty were always educated in the public system, which is still largely considered to be of better quality than the private. Unfortunately, soon we will not have enough students to maintain this large offer of HE. The war has started. The 1st October 2011 was the first day for the reform in which the Ministry of HE (MHE) declared the "decontamination of the last bastion of the communist era," meaning of academia and the science sector.

It is worth noticing that the present Minister in the ultraliberal government comes from the private HE system. The proposed changes indicate that the competition between the private and the public sector have already started. The justification for this competition is the free market rule (the best wins). But this game concerns two very different players: public HE is composed of large institutions (56,000 students and 3,100 faculty at the Warsaw University) and provides all kind of university teaching including science (departments of physics, biology, chemistry) while the private colleges are mainly of modest size and focused on managerial teaching, humanities and social sciences. It is evident that teaching science needs more financial support than teaching management. Consequently, the public universities have to cover all expenses related to buildings, equipment and staff maintenance. Private institutions are in a different financial situation – all students pay tuition and fees, and the maintaining of buildings is incomparably cheaper. State supports financially both systems, but public universities represent the major part of the costs. It is not difficult to understand why the government would want to cast off HE, but not by erasing public HE by a simple law (it is against Polish constitution which guarantees the access of higher education to people who pass the selection) but by privatizing, as much as possible, public universities.

Symbolic attacks on public universities (as a vestige of the old regime and an environment corrupted by nepotism) took place in the Polish mainstream media which supported the liberal changes introduced by the government. This is not only the case of HE – privatization follows the direction of present government and the political changes, which had occurred in Poland during recent years, when the health system, education and transportation have all undergone a process of privatization. However, even if we are deeply engaged in such a process – this is not openly said. The idea of progressive privatization of HE is hidden behind the slogan of modernization, internationalization and a race for the highest place in the world rankings.

If several changes which take place in Polish HE are found in other countries (EU but also South America, for example) there are some interesting specificities. Sociologists like case studies and the extreme cases are al-

ways very important for understanding the hidden mechanisms which are present but invisible in an “average” case. The subject of my study (careers of transnational scientists) and extended fieldwork (France, Poland, USA) give me the basis for saying that the Polish case of HE reform is an extreme case. The Polish situation offers an important dose of absurdity and paradoxical mechanisms which destroy instead of improving the sector of HE and research. This sector has existed for hundreds of years and worked despite financial difficulties, leaving some brilliant pages in its history.

From the Polish example, I would like to show how the post-colonial effects of ‘copy/paste solutions’ influenced the renewal of the old career path of Polish faculty/researchers.

### **The situation of Polish faculty and researchers: taking part in the “formula 1 race” with an old horse**

The insiders to academia world know why the so called “anomalies” appear. Sociologically speaking, when politicians call the phenomenon an “anomaly” a sociologist (after Becker’s labeling effects and change of perspective on deviance) see the effect of a process, which allows the appearance of such category. The first “anomaly” of Polish HE is called multi-employment. The situation is rarely present in developed countries. Multi-employment means that for example: a professor holds the position (of a Professor) at 2 universities and 1 college. This kind of hyper activity does not stem from the love of Polish faculty for accumulating teaching hours, but an adaptation to extremely low pay. The salary of an associate professor is about 2.400zł, which is 774 USD per month with cost of living higher than in Berlin (and in several places in the EU; food prices are higher than in the US and standard of living similar to an average US city). These salaries are certainly the lowest in the industrialized and developed countries if we are taking into account the years of education and the working time of faculty and researchers. The last reform has explicitly encouraged multi-employment instead of increasing the salary of faculties. This looks like quackery instead of professional therapy that might have resolved the problem.

Everyone is convinced that multi-employment (having three positions of teaching – means a minimum of 18 courses per week) is not a positive phenomenon for the quality of scientific and pedagogical work. It should not be allowed – we agree. We would like to have a situation similar to our German colleagues: an associate professor earns about 3,277 E – which is 4,527 USD per month – which would be a 584% salary increase. That should be changed but, to do that our politicians would have needed an idea and a clear plan how to achieve this.

In Poland 2011 the Ministry of HE did not introduce any important changes but made a lot of promises instead. Everybody expects HE teaching and research staff to work hard. In addition to the full time faculty position (210 hours per year) we should be conducting research at the “highest world-level”, present excellent and outstanding results (at the international scale) and be internationally mobile. A Polish researcher/faculty should publish in Nature, Science or the American Journal of Sociology and should be invited as a visiting professor to an IVY league university. He or she should participate in numerous conferences (regardless of the fact that we only have 100 Euros per year for this purpose). This means that we should add our own money for participation in professional events; some persons have grants but the number of grant holders is ridiculously small – especially in social sciences. We should also participate in international research projects, but how are we supposed to do that if we do not have strong support for going abroad? Even more – if someone is successful and obtains a scholarship for doing research abroad the salary is cut to zero – in the case of faculty with family this is a difficult situation since scholarship covers only the fees of research and life for 1 person. All these expectations are to be satisfied for only \$774 monthly! This is an example of outstanding performance by our ministry in human capital management!

### **New career path: from academic to administrator**

The result of these policies are illustrated very well by a testimony of one young, gifted psychologist supported by governmental funding, at Warsaw University Dr. Michał Bilewicz, who wrote an article published in a major Polish Journal. The title of his paper is relevant: “The academic as an administrator”. For many years this Young Scientist received his education for free (in the past it was the rule, now it is changing but

typically future scientists will get their education in public universities free of tuition). The state invests in this gifted and hardworking person. When Young Scientists gets their first experiences by completing his research project (PhD), some are evaluated as “the best”. For them it is a jack-pot, necessary for entering a unique career path possible in Poland. They receive money for conducting their own project, but now it involves a shift in tasks for which they are not prepared — “from an academic to an administrator”. It is important to note that the particularity of the Polish system of division of academic work, including research, is the relative absence of management, a research assistant or a grant manager, who will take care of the administrative work. The PIs, who are usually faculty members in charge of at least 6 courses per week, have to manage their grant expenses as well as any administrative work (which involves a lot of work in Poland where bureaucracy is well established).

At this moment the principal activity of the Young Researcher is changing from conducting research to the administration of grants, writing the next grant projects and preparing reports. This is a very fast process (which occurs faster for “gifted scientists”) during which the Young Scientist loses contact with the bench (which means stopping work in the “wet lab” or simply no longer active at this practical stage of the research process) and become the manager and organizer of finances for scientific activity of his/her team. I should clarify that it is an excellent idea to give support to young scientists but all efforts should be made to avoid forcing them to do things that are nothing to do with their highly skilled education. If, in other sectors of collective activity, such as business, this specialization is quite normal, it is not so in science.

Should we educate the highest level specialists so that they can later become administrators? Isn't it irrational to promote only one model of scientific career? Is it beneficial to push people to pass as quickly as possible to the next stage and to oblige a researcher to become a PI and the boss of a team? Actually new rules give young scientists a limited time to pass through each stage of career (PhD should be finished in 8 years, and after following 8 years a researcher should earn the habilitation, which I will explain later). The final goal is to create one's own team of researchers and become a laboratory leader if a person chooses to continue to work as a scientist. This model is only viable in a context of intensive development (similar to US in the late 50s and 60s). However, this kind of dynamic development of science is simply impossible in a country like Poland today, with a government that devotes less than 1% of the GDP (next to the last place in the EU – Malta being the last on the list) to science.

If this unique model of a career is established (as is happening now) basic scientific activity will remain in the hands of PhD students and rare post-docs (in Poland we have not largely developed a system of post-doc positions)! Here we should consider the modification of knowledge production. How can we provide for the transmission of knowledge if the person who is best qualified for sharing it, is in the office filling out forms and writing grant projects instead of being at the bench where experiments take place? Does this kind of division of work guarantee progress in science? I am sure that some scientists dream about being a lab-leader and leading their own team but this is not the goal of all of them. Certainly, the scientific environment needs people who manage and organize the work of others, but it should not be forced upon people who decide to devote their professional life to science and academia. The strength of French research organization in CNRS was to offer senior researchers positions and not to oblige scientists (or faculty) to become laboratory leaders or to get habilitation. How is it possible that the politicians from the Ministry of Higher Education consider only one model of career in this area (and actually not only in this sector – imagine all managers in the factory who should also be the CEO and the president of the board! – and if not – they are evicted from the sector!!!).

### **For ever young and always excellent**

The focus on the “young and excellent” match perfectly with the model of the “successful man (or woman)” as quasi genius: gifted and simply outstanding. He (rarely she) will have support to the age of 35. To be a hard working scientist it is not enough – one must simply be “outstanding”. I will not elaborate now on all people who made major discoveries and achievements after blowing 35 candles on their birthday's cake. People who were never perceived as outstanding (some of them during their whole life) and despite this fact, made outstanding discoveries. It is curious, however, how the producers of the new reform justify their new

rules with the European slogan „life-long training” – unless we assume that the life of a scientists and an academic finishes at 35?

Probably the solution to this tricky situation is to learn another profession. According to the new rules, we will have the following model of careers in the world of science and academia: after many years of college and university training, after obtaining a PhD, than two post-doc contracts (obviously abroad), years of work in a research laboratory and at a University as an assistant professor, we should undergo professional conversion. However, this is not a matter of fashion similar to the post-1968 period when French intellectuals went to the mountains and became shepherds. Perhaps it is a very trendy way of showing our dynamism, imagination and creativity, for example we will start by training in hair cutting and then take a job in a hair-dresser salon. In Poland this would certainly mean a better salary than faculty but a very painful job for the legs – so perhaps working as shepherds is a better plan since it is still possible to have some time for reading!

For those who succeed to measure up to all mentioned expectations – the next stage of career will be available: the process of habilitation.

Critical point in Polish faculty/researcher career – habilitation two in one – miraculous recipe or an exploding mixture?

The next “eclectic” rule of the copy/paste mechanism concerns the habilitation process. Now we are deep into the confusion of two systems practiced in the world. First, in brief, the “American system” (based on British tradition) in which after PhD the scientist is an independent researcher, and after post-docs they can apply for faculty position – publishing and doing research. Tenure is a matter for the university in which the academic work is not a concern of the state. The second system (we can call it European) is mainly a state-controlled system in which the academics are subjected to a highly complex hierarchy. Instead of strict rules regulated by complex law the state takes care of the conditions of work in which the scientist/faculty climb the following stages of career. Not all persons should go through following stages of a career but all these people are at some level (in France maitre de conference – associate professor) tenured. The habilitation was not an obligatory path – someone could stay for life maitre de conference – associate professor pursuing a whole career of researching and teaching without having the right to supervise PhD students. The reform changed this rule (accepted in other countries).

Our Ministry has put two different systems in one place – unfortunately putting faculty in an absurd and non viable situation: At present (except all “old” faculty) we have already a contracts system of hiring (1, 2, 3, 5 and rarely 8 years). This situation is unusual in the so called “budget sector” – state workers have in general unlimited contracts called “etat”. We – faculty – we lost this security of employment. We are evaluated on the publications (mostly in foreign journals – as Janusz Mucha described in his article from 2010). And we are subjected to intense competition (publishing in order to win next 3 years contract). During eight years of successive contracts after the date of getting PhD we should pass the habilitation process. The habilitation is a product of the systems in which the academic is a state worker and has the comfort of job security and good conditions of work in which such achievement as habilitation is possible to attain. The criteria of the quality of the habilitation work are tough. It is impossible to conduct two different strategies of careers – one focus on habilitation and second – being deeply involved in free competition – worrying about grant attribution, contract prolongation and publishing for points (we are Polish native speakers not English and in humanities and social sciences this factor is a huge disadvantage). Formerly, a candidate for habilitation focused on the long term project – long lasting research or writing of important work which could bring significant contribution to the discipline (this is why not everyone went through this process).

In Poland there was a big debate about the abolition of the habilitation (as in the US) but finally we have two in one. Discussion focused on habilitation and almost silently passed over the reform which seems to me of primary importance – quasi dispensation of TENURE.

### **Tenure -mission impossible: 30 years of work for tenure and 10% of tenured faculty**

The tenure issue is frequently a topic of discussion among faculty around the world. In Poland we achieved

the extreme situation thanks to the reform. Previously, as I mentioned, all faculty had a permanent contract (without stipulation of the end of service). Actually only limited contracts are offered to new faculty. The stages of career are the following: PhD student (assistant professor), Adjunct (sort of associate – compatible with French maitre de conference), then after habilitation exam (which should be taken with 9 years of the PhD examination) and several years of waiting for the position of professor – Dr Hab.X will get position of Professor Nadzwyczajny (extraordinary professor) . After several years of services and numerous publications and first of all – getting the scientific title of Belveder's professor. Unfortunately for Polish faculty and scientists – we have also to run for the third scientific title (when in the US you have only one – PhD). After PhD – first exam and habilitation – second- we should seek to become professor called Belvederski. Belveder is the Polish “White House” and this name is related to the place where such title is awarded. Whether the title is awarded or not depends on a special commission and the signature of President of Poland who finally gives this title. The title in English is: full professor appointed by the President of Poland. The person with such a prestigious title could be nominated for Profesor Zwyczajny (Ordinary Professor). In my institution (ranked as the 1st in Poland), only 10% of faculty are full Professor and they obtained this title after 28 to 40 years after PhD! This is a tenured position.

Obviously only a few get advance to this level. According to the new reform we – faculty – will receive tenure almost at the age of retirement. No wonder that the average age of getting tenure in Poland is currently 62! Isn't this a perfect type of a feudal society? In a so-called democratic country?

This is a huge obstacle in this world of competition especially related to the mobility of academics. When our colleagues (graduated in the same year) in the US, France, Switzerland are tenured – we have before us more than 20 years of a step by step career track composed of 7 stages in which the last 4 are professorship and only very last (which a few will achieve) is tenured!

In fact, our career consists in having short term contracts during our whole life. That means not having a possibility to take mortgage for an apartment and no job security. With this kind of contract we are even not able to take a loan to buy a PC! (which by the way costs over one month's salary and it is very rare that a university buys any such equipment for us). This kind of condition joined with high skills and expertise is usually paid with a large salary and not one thousand dollars per month. It is perhaps useful to mention that the people who works in government offices have, in general, permanent contracts and a much better salary than faculty (if we control for a similar level of education). How can we survive this kind of restrictions? How can we speak about internationalization of HE if we have to survive in inferior conditions.

As the justification for these changes we heard that in Europe and all over the world this is a tendency now, so we in Poland are adapting our system to others. I ask – why we should always act as a post-colonial country and without criticism copying each rule from “western countries” trying to be as modern and developed as them? Why aren't we looking at our particular context?

### **We have our past!**

This reform is presented as if we did not have any previous achievements in HE and research in Poland. We have to consider the situation before 1989. Looking uncritically on Western successes and systems the politicians forget (or never knew?) our past and our traditions. Perhaps it is worthwhile to look back and learn what happened before WW2 in Lwow? It was one city in Galicia known as a “cradle of world level talents”. Was the activity of the scientists living in this city based only on young scientists aged 35 and less? Or was it the result of a specific milieu and team work? And what about the so-called Warsaw School? Or the Wroclaw school of mathematics? How is it possible that here we were able to develop an outstanding school of informatics or middle age historians? Or Polish school of crystallographers recognized by the whole world? Do these politicians and authors of the campaign to support female scientists, know that there were women in the first generation of Polish crystallographers? Do the politicians of HE not understand that the continuity of tradition of the Polish university and science is not limited to the Soviet period? Science is grounded in the rela-

tionship between master and disciple and this is the most solid basis for transmitting knowledge. This is why in the very difficult time of war the tradition of university teaching and even scientific research survived. This was possible only thanks to the activity of several groups of academics who were passionate about their research. Is this reform based on “knowledge”. If it is so, why we are so deeply immersed in the lack of information?

### **And the lion gave birth to the mouse**

We had promises that our future would be better Welcome to the era of new rules – the reform is in place now. Only after the beginning of the academic year, on the 5th October 2011, 3 days before the parliamentary election, did we learn that we would get a salary increase of 9% in 2012 and almost 10% in 2013 and 2014. But since 2005 we did not have any increase of payment, so this change is only an adjustment to inflation. We are far from our EU colleagues – and the 600% increase, which would provide the necessary conditions for playing in the European court and competing with our colleagues. There is never a discussion of the conditions of work and work contracts.

Also in the past, each person who was hired at a public university had a permanent contract . No longer. At present new faculty are only offered time limited contracts.

Before a vote on the reform the Minister promised that we will have a better life (we know this kind of discourse from before 1989) but... under the condition that we will be “talented” and “outstanding”! As a sociologist specialising in the scientific careers, I know what kind of imprecise notions are contained in these adjectives. And these are supposed to be the “concrete terms” on which this reform is based. The foundations of university activity – which is the transmission of knowledge and the master-disciple relationship and all the conditions of pedagogy – are not considered.. The activity of faculty is to teach and conduct research but the evaluation is focused on research (for social scientists on publications and grants). Why is pedagogy so neglected?

Politicians forget the basis of all education and science, namely, collaboration which means sharing knowledge and recognizing diversity. Collaboration is the basis for the effective functioning of the team. In a team each person has a different role to play. It is not the place for one single speciality. This obvious statement is far from the spirit of reform. Focusing on one single category of scientists (successful and young) leads to discrimination against those who would arrive at success later. The copy/paste strategy was employed by our Ministry without adapting the rules to the environment. Also they copied different models. This is a curious option that was taken – if Poland should have similar results as US science (US scientific achievement is accomplished in HUGE part by people educated before the post-doc in other countries) why this restriction based on the age.

Copied from the EU financial strategy which supports (also but not only) young scientists Poland appears as an extreme case. Why did the Ministry not copy from the US the absence of age discrimination in the distribution of grants? Why, if we are expected to perform on the international level, should we have such local constraints, why do we have to wait for tenure until habilitation and Belveder’s professor? Why is the evaluation of grants not anonymous and why is it not based on the quality of the project only? Why are the rules which are applied here, so typical of a central state power, limiting the possibility of pursuing decent work in our specialty?

### **The loss of balance – the end of academia and research in Poland?**

Apart from the analysis of such absurd situations and the social aspects of these kinds of trajectories, I wonder if someone has thought about the economic basis of ministerial strategies? How much does the state spend on the education of highly skilled specialists?

The recent changes are the continuity of the process which started after 1990. The polarization of salaries between HE and the science sector on the one side and new open free market of financial, business and adminis-

tration institutions, on the other side, provoke an internal brain drain from the universities. Highly skilled academics took positions in private companies resulting in the feminization of faculty. Women, considered as a secondary bread winner, have been able to pursue the faculty career and invest their life in science and academia. Today comparing with the other EU countries Polish HE is among the most feminized – Renata Sieminska calls these women “winners among the losers”. Even some years ago a career in science was not an attractive professional path because of a low salary and very high expectation. A lot of young people who after MA would like to be engage in PhD program, dropped out of this career path for financial reasons. For the same reasons a lot of PhDs, despite passion for research and teaching, decide not to pursue academic career.

In Poland it is almost impossible to survive with the salary of faculty or researcher only. Those who would like to raise a family have to decide who, will stay in the academia and who will “earn money for the other who is working as a scientist”. According to my study without the parental support (or the support of the partner) it is impossible to pursue postgraduate studies. This kind of situation obviously discriminates against those from lower and middle class. Science is reserved only for the rich because before being labeled as a “gifted” and “good” scientist it is necessary to do research, and to write and publish the results. Each of these activities needs support, which is not given by any institution. Parents will pay for your PC, living and books, and partner will provide the money for food and cloths. If there are children then it is a very difficult situation. At each step of scientific career without support of the family the pursuit of this highly intense and demanding activity is impossible simply for financial reasons.

Obviously in such a context a lot of us will choose the “perfect” solution, emigration. The next waves of Polish scientists we will read in Polish newspapers about “Polish scientists who are not able to publish” . They publish a lot but... under the affiliation of non-Polish institutions, because in their home country they do not have adequate conditions for doing scientific work properly.

Diversity constitutes a guarantee of survival within any environment. In the forest there are not only trees. If we destroy each plant except for oaks – the forest will inevitably die soon.. So it is with academia and science. Providing only one kind of career path for new faculty and focusing on one category of scientist (and faculty) lead to very dangerous decision. The ecology of our system, which until now provided the education of millions of people, and thanks to which we are so-well educated, will collapse soon.

Poland