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The Status of Students at the University of the Future – an Analysis of the Main Documents of the Debate on Polish Higher Education Reform

The post-1989 changes to Polish universities were the result of a triple pressure – first, there was the will to liberalise a system devoid of autonomy that was brought to life in the period of the People’s Republic of Poland; second, the need to conform to the processes of academic institution standardisation within supra- and international organisations (European Higher Education Area and the European Union); and third was the issue of corrections to the functioning of higher education facilities in Poland in the context of the post-Communist reduction of the welfare state combined with the high personal demand for academic-level education. In recent years, the three areas of pressure have been supplemented by a fourth, namely, the perception of higher education as a system which impacts the state’s economic growth and as a potential globalised branch of the service sector.

In the course of formulating the currently implemented higher education reform, a process ongoing for the last few years, all four abovementioned factors have played a role. The process of preparing the reform was accompanied by public debate that allowed varied public actors to express their interests and beliefs on the reform and the target shape of higher education. The debate drew participation from powerful actors, such as the state, ministry-hired experts and academic trade organisations, as well as a number of actors of lower standing – regular academics, students, the academic administration, entrepreneurs, and other social stakeholders.

One of the axes of the debate was the balance between the mass effect of higher education, which could be observed in the last twenty years, on the one hand, and the needs of the state and the economy with the added question of the quality of education on the other. The “problem” of the mass character of higher education, both in Poland and in countries which underwent the same process in previous decades, occurs with the clash between the interests of (future) students, the interests of the state which cannot provide financial support to higher education, and of academics that seek to protect the autonomy of their respective institutions. Within the Polish debate, the dominant voice was that of powerful institutions and

organisations, while the representatives of the student body did not play a major part. The goal of this article is to analyse, on the basis of two documents that played a major part in the debate, the way the dominating actors – the state and the academics – conceptualised the future position of students, the actor whose capability to publicly articulate their interests was the lowest.

Research context

The post-1989 reforms of Polish higher education were connected with the restitution of academic freedom, an increase of the autonomy of universities, the enabling of the founding of non-public higher education facilities and the charging of education fees if they were not paid by more than half of the students. These changes were accompanied by a major lowering of the part of the Gross National Product (GNP) spent on higher education and science¹, which, when combined with the abovementioned liberalisation, resulted in the emergence of a large higher education market. The market allowed for private resources to reach public and non-public universities, at the same time forcing the higher productivity of academics (the number of students grew five-fold between 1989 and 2010² with the number of academic teachers changing only to a minor degree)³. Similarly to other comparable episodes of the sudden massification of higher education, this caused fears of the lowering of the standards of education. Because the process of setting up new specialisations was totally dependent on market mechanisms – i.e. was dependent on the costs of conducting classes and demand – there was an additional element of the negative feelings towards the system, namely the structure of education, where the dominant specialisations are those within the humanities, the social sciences, management, and law. The structure of education dominated by the abovementioned specialisations is considered inadequate in the light of the dominant theoretical models that present the structure of developed economies as well as the needs of the Polish job market. Yet another element of the system which

¹ M. Kwiek, *Finansowanie szkolnictwa wyższego w Polsce a transformacje finansowania publicznego szkolnictwa wyższego w Europie* [Financing of higher education in Poland and the transformations of the financing of higher education in Europe], Centre of Public Policy Studies, "Research Papers" 2010, vol. 16.

² World Bank, *Tertiary Education in Poland*, Biuro Banku Światowego w Polsce, Warsaw 2004, p. 2; Eurostat, *Students in Tertiary Education*, accessed on 10.09.2012 from <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tps00062&plugin>.

³ According to the popularly referenced data, the number of FTEs of academic teachers in Poland had grown from 64 thousand in 1989 to 103 thousand in 2010, an increase of 61%, and has stayed on the same level since then (GUS, *Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Poland 2011*, Zakład Wydawnictw Statystycznych, Warsaw 2012, p. 343). At the same time, there are sources indicating that if taking multiple FTEs per person, the actual number of academic teachers fell by 10% in the same timespan (M. Papużyńska, J. Cieśla, *Szkoły wyższe – reforma i mity* [Tertiary schools – reform and myths], accessed on 10.09.2012 from <http://www.polityka.pl/spoleczenstwo/artykuly/1513512,1,szkoły-wyzsze-reforma-i-mity-read>).

received negative remarks was academic achievements, considered inadequate to the potential of the state, as well as the weak cooperation with industry and the commercialisation of knowledge. Similarly to the structure of education, the aspect of academic achievements is criticised in the light of the dominant theoretical models of the economy, even despite the relatively low knowledge absorption of Polish industry⁴ and relatively high share of research contracted and financed by private and public companies among OECD states⁵.

The abovementioned assessments were formulated during a public debate⁶ which accompanied the process of formulating the subject matter of the reform of higher education. The intent to reform the higher education sector was communicated by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the newly-formed 2007 Civic Platform cabinet. The debate on the early design of the reform drew participants from the Ministry itself, media, trade organisations representing university rectors and students, non-government organisations, and to some degree commercial organisations. Earlier international organisation reports on higher education in Poland were also of significant importance to the debate – especially the 2007 OECD report⁷, as well as the plans of development of the state and higher education formulated in previous years⁸, and documents such as the *Autodiagnoza polskiego środowiska naukowego* [Self-diagnosis of the Polish academic environment]⁹, a report of the Collegium Civitas research.

Some of the crucial documents drafted during the debate were two complete strategies for the development of higher education and the reform of the existing system. One was prepared by the Institute for Market Economy Research (Instytut Badań nad Gospodarką Rynkową, IBnGR) and the Ernst&Young Business

⁴ OECD, *OECD Science, Technology and Industry Outlook 2008*, accessed on 10.09.2012 from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/453711056038>.

⁵ OECD, *OECD Reviews of Tertiary Education Poland*, OECD Publishing 2007, p. 149.

⁶ The abstracted versions of the assessment of the state of higher education can be found in many media reports, as well as in reports and strategies on the system of higher education in Poland, e.g.: Ernst & Young Business Advisory & Instytut Badań nad Gospodarką Rynkową, *Diagnoza stanu szkolnictwa wyższego w Polsce* [Diagnosis of the state of tertiary education in Poland], Instytut Badań nad Gospodarką Rynkową, Warsaw 2009; Konferencja Rektorów Akademickich Szkół Polskich, *Strategia rozwoju szkolnictwa wyższego 2010-2020 – projekt środowiskowy* [Strategy of the development of tertiary education 2010-2020 – the circle's project], Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warsaw 2009.

⁷ OECD, *OECD Reviews of Tertiary Education Poland*, OECD Publishing 2007.

⁸ Ministerstwo Nauki i Szkolnictwa Wyższego, *Strategia rozwoju nauki w Polsce do 2015 roku* [Strategy of the development of education in Poland to 2015], Warsaw 2007; Zespół doradców strategicznych Prezesa Rady Ministrów, *Raport o kapitale intelektualnym Polski* [Poland's intellectual capital report], Warsaw 2008; Ministerstwo Rozwoju Regionalnego, *Narodowe strategiczne ramy odniesienia 2007–2013* [National Strategic Reference Framework], Warsaw 2006; Ministerstwo Rozwoju Regionalnego, *Program operacyjny kapitał ludzki* [Human capital operational programme], Warsaw 2006; Ministerstwo Nauki i Szkolnictwa Wyższego, *Wyniki narodowego programu Foresight. Polska 2020* [The results of the national Foresight programme. Poland 2020], Warsaw 2009.

⁹ *Autodiagnoza polskiego środowiska naukowego* [Self-diagnosis of the Polish scientific circles], Collegium Civitas, Warsaw 2007.

Advisory (E&Y)¹⁰ – two organisations that won the tender for the preparation of the strategy, initiated by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education. The other was prepared by the Conference of Rectors of Academic Schools in Poland (Konferencja Rektorów Akademickich Szkół Polskich, KRASP)¹¹, an academic trade organisation. These documents present the viewpoint of the two most important actors in the debate. On one hand there is the state, represented by non-government (IBnGR) and commercial (E&Y) organisations that possess expert knowledge and that are, by definition, neutral to the debate surrounding the reform; on the other, the representatives of academic authorities. Both strategies contain a complete assessment of higher education in Poland and suggest changes to the model of financing and managing the system.

In my research, I focused on the two strategic documents because they express the point of view of the two main actors of the debate to the highest degree, and the visions contained therein are complex and coherent. Both documents present a complete picture of higher education and the interconnections between actors in the area, both in the current and the intended state of the system. My main point of interest was the differences and similarities to the way the position of students was conceptualised; this latter actor neither drew excessive media attention nor led to the publication of a document of a similar calibre to the two mentioned above.

Theoretical foundations

I see the debate on the higher education system in Poland as a public space debate on its future shape. The actors of the debate apply discursive models in order to define the present and future state of their fields of interest. Following Fairclough, I chose to define the models as imaginaria, or discursive constructs that serve as “projections of possible states of affairs, ‘possible worlds’ [...], possible social practices and networks of social practices, possible syntheses of activities, subjects, social relations, instruments, objects, spacetimes, values, forms of consciousness”¹². In the words of Bob Jessop¹³, when describing debates between social forces on the shape of their institutional environment in the conditions of institutional crisis: “Which of these alternative outcomes eventually emerges will be mediated in part through discursive struggles over the nature and significance of the crisis and what might follow from it. In periods of major social restructuring

¹⁰ Ernst&Young Business Advisory & Instytut Badań nad Gospodarką Rynkową, *Strategia rozwoju szkolnictwa wyższego w Polsce do 2020 roku* [Strategy of development of tertiary education in Poland to 2020], Instytut Badań nad Gospodarką Rynkową, Warsaw 2009.

¹¹ Konferencja Rektorów Akademickich Szkół Polskich, *Strategia rozwoju szkolnictwa wyższego 2010–2020 – projekt środowiskowy* [Strategy of the development of tertiary education 2010–2020 – the circle’s project], Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warsaw 2009.

¹² N. Fairclough, *The Dialectics of Discourse*, “Textus” 2001, 14(2), p. 233.

¹³ B. Jessop, *The Future of the Capitalist State*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2002.

there is an intersection of diverse economic, political and sociocultural narratives that seek to give meaning to current problems by construing them in terms of past failures and future possibilities. Different social forces in the private and public domains propose new visions, projects, programmes and policies”¹⁴.

The clash of ideas is by no means free of conflict. “There is ample scope for competition among social forces over accumulation strategies, state projects, and hegemonic visions [...]. In this context a key role is played by the rivalries and struggles of intellectual forces, individually and collectively [...] to articulate strategies, projects and visions that seek to reconcile contradictions and conflicts and to resolve dilemmas for various sites and scales of action” (Gramsci 1971; Jessop 1990; Portelli 1973). The main forces involved in the competition are interest groups, political parties, and social movements, although it is the mass media rather than social areas that occupy the central position, allowing them to mediate the debate on hegemony¹⁵. Jessop’s theory, using the idea of the *imaginarium* similarly to Fairclough, is mostly related to debates that allow new economic regimes to form at the time of crisis. In the scope of this research, I am using it as a model of debate with a narrower scope. It needs to be added that contemporary debates on higher education do not relate only to “instruction”, but thanks to popular theories on interconnections between the system of higher education, the economy and government, are comprehended by the involved parties as debates in the future economic and political position of the state as a whole.

The above results in the conclusion that debates in the shape of specific institutions (a) take place in the public or media space, (b) occur with actors that seek to protect their own interest (c) and who employ specific discursive resources (*imaginaria*) in the discourse, which in turn are (d) coherent, abstract models of the situation that contain the information on the subjects and relations between them. The goal of the actors is to present *imaginaria* connecting the subjects within the field of the debate, that would solve “discrepancies” and “dilemmas” that endanger the field in its current state. Because the entirety of any area of human activity is too complex to be a subject of a holistic understanding or consideration, the describing *imaginaria* are selective and incomplete. One of the main goals of formulating such *imaginaria*, however, is to establish whether it is possible to “fix” some elements as possible objects of intervention or rule¹⁶. The “theories” describing the area of activity and formulated by the actors serve to create knowledge on the subject of the debate as well as to gain control by declaring what can be the subject of the field. The implementation of the *imaginarium* constitutes the component subjects, even if they were non-existent in the field before. Thus, knowledge, at least related to social relations, both applies to an area and helps constitute it.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 120; also cf. M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, transl. A. Sheridan, Random House Inc., New York 1995.

Imaginaria are not created in a vacuum but in a cultural context, causing some solutions to be preferred over others. The influence of the context on local solutions and vision of the activity of individual social areas is a subject of discourse theory¹⁷ and institutional theory of organisation¹⁸ or, in a specific form, the actor-network theory¹⁹. In the context of this research, a precise definition of the way a transfer occurs, the way Discourses, with an intentional capital D, influence local practices²⁰, institutional logics²¹, rational myths²² or blackboxed sets of practices²³ is not necessary. This does not entail the transfer or the influence itself does not occur – there is a canon of discourses/myths/models/theories not abandoned by the participants of the debate and used to construct the field's imaginaria. In order to avoid ambiguity, in this paper, following the institutional theory of organisation, I will assign the name of rational myths to the external theoretical elements used as the basis for local imaginaria. From the perspective of this paper, the fact that the analysed documents are drafted by actors representing specific interest groups is more important than the influence of globally-spreading rational myths. The activity of such interest groups serves to secure their own position, and to define the future of the area in a way that allows specific actors to retain their institutional "state of ownership". Rational myths, often of global range, are interpreted, localised, and modified for this purpose, so as to allow space for subjects, practices, and ways of acting which are considered coherent with the interest of the actors. The discursive debate plays out on the level of these processes of redefinition – individual actors define their "own" positions, or rather positions that they will assume in the resultant system, as dominating, rational, and subjective; at the same time they redefine the positions of other actors that they will be interacting with, within the imaginarium, as subordinate and requiring constant supervision. Because imaginaria are coherent maps of practices, subjective positions, etc., there is no place for a purely utopian "reconciliation of differences" that would secure the interests of all parties, typical for less formalised ways of narration. The actors, when scrupulously designing the future institutional sys-

¹⁷ N. Fairclough, *Language and Power*, Longman, London, New York 1989; M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Vintage, New York 1982.

¹⁸ R.R. Friedland, R. Alford, *Bringing Society Back in: Symbols, Practices, and Institutional Contradictions*, [in:] *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*, W. Powell, P. DiMaggio (eds.), University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1991, p. 232; J.W. Meyer, B. Rowan, *Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony*, "American Journal of Sociology" 1977, p. 340.

¹⁹ B. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005.

²⁰ J.P. Gee, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis Theory and Method*, Routledge, London, New York 1999.

²¹ R.R. Friedland, R. Alford, *Bringing Society Back in: Symbols, Practices, and Institutional Contradictions*, [in:] *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*, W. Powell, P. DiMaggio (eds.), University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1991.

²² J.W. Meyer, B. Rowan, *Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony*, "American Journal of Sociology" 1977.

²³ B. Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1999.

tem, also define positions of power – subjective positions – and subordinate, objective positions, always striving for places that they or their clients occupy, to belong to the former category.

The goal of this research is to compare the imaginaria of the higher education systems as constructed in the two documents drafted for the purpose of the public debate. The main focus area is the students who, similarly to some other groups within the system of higher education, have an unclear status as opposed to a “standard” actor within a “standard” organisation – at the same time they are outside the organisation, as its client, and they are inside it, e.g. as apprentices that are being prepared by their masters to reproduce the education system. Determining who they are in reference to the universities – whether they are a product, a client, a student to the academic masters, a member of the community, etc. – is necessary for each coherent imaginarium of a university. The unclear status of students is especially prone to reinterpretations and “fixing” within the narration of the debate in which they play a limited part as a consequence of their low social status and lack of access to institutionalised forms of expressing their opinion. Therefore, they are in a position that needs to be defined, but at the same time they lack major influence on the definition process.

The research material – two strategic documents – was coded for two elements: first, the types of actors mentioned in the documents and constituting the internal and external “ecosystem” of higher education, and, second, the designed target relations between the actors. This allowed the definition of the positions that are positions of power, those that are subordinate, and the reasons and mechanisms of subordination.

Results

The models presented in both strategies can be said to be partially antagonistic. Following the publication of the reports, the authors entered a brief debate in the press²⁴. At the same time, there is no significant difference between the two documents in respect to the rational myths that are employed in the university narration. In both the IBnGR/E&Y and KRASP reports, the most important reference points are: a concept of economy based on the knowledge of a learning society²⁵, New Public Management²⁶, and analogous documents (OECD report) as well as models of the academic system (American model). Neither of the strategic documents makes references e.g. to the Humboldtian tradition, autotelic value of

²⁴ P. Węgleński, *Magister brojler* [Broiler, M.A.], “Polityka”, 16 March 2010, accessed from: <http://www.polityka.pl/kraj/analizy/1504212,1,jaka-strategia-dla-szkol-wyzszych.read>; B. Wyżnikiewicz, *Zerwany pakt o nieagresji* [Broken Non-aggression Pact], *Polityka*, 24 March 2010, accessed from: <http://www.polityka.pl/kraj/analizy/1504428,1,zerwany-pakt-o-nieagresji.read>.

²⁵ B.A. Lundvall, *The University in the Learning Economy*, Aalborg Universitet, Aalborg 2002.

²⁶ J.E. Lane, *New Public Management*, Routledge, London, New York 2000.

knowledge, etc., which have until recently been basic components of the imaginaria of continental Europe universities.

Despite the convergence of the “languages” used by the actors, both strategies differ significantly in their ideas of financing and managing tertiary schools. The parties of the debate present different reinterpretations of the abovementioned rational myths, constructing their own versions of higher education imaginaria, according to which the social actors of the document authors’ design ought to be in subjective charge of the basic higher education institutions, at the same time limiting their adversaries’ position²⁷. The issue of the status of the students was not in the heart of the debate but it was strongly intertwined into the narration on the reasons behind the “crisis” of Polish higher education and the suggestions of remedies to that crisis. Students, or rather the influence they exert through the education market, are placed in both documents as one of the core reasons for the crisis. Both sides present different concepts of the way the influence of students ought to be limited so that the desired shape of the system of higher education can be achieved, each side according to their own general logic of discourse.

Students as consumers and as a product

The interpretation of the status of a student is directly stated in the E&Y/IBnGR strategy:

(I) The key role of universities as the engine for civilisation development and innovation has seen the onset of criticism, although on the other hand the demand for **its most important product, qualified workforce, has increased**. (E&Y/IBnGR, p. 58)

Here, students are not treated as a subject of interactions within the area of higher education but rather as a product of the area. Such interpretation automatically changes the status of university students from a subjective one, allowing to co-shape the organisation with the use of various tools, towards an objective one – allowing to be merely shaped by other actors in the area.

This reinterpretation occurs through the change in understanding of the desired interconnections between the individual actors that constitute, or ought to constitute, the area of higher education: universities, the state, the job market, and students. The justification for such change is a negative assessment of the structure of education, closely connected with the structure of financing the universities.

²⁷ Both New Public Management and the Knowledge-Based Economy are theoretical constructs well-suited to the role of providers of discursive “ammunition” to both sides of the conflict. They can be freely interpreted either in favour of the wide autonomy of universities, or, more precisely, their administrators, or precise control by the state, even if it is performed through semi-market mechanisms. Both sides also make use of the discrepancies between the declared assumptions of the concepts and the varied practices across various countries that derive from the assumptions.

One of the fundamental changes in the structure of financing, as proposed by E&Y/IBnGR, is to replace the stationary grant, which all public tertiary education schools are eligible for and which is calculated with an algorithm, with a didactic grant, which would be granted following a bid submitted to the ministry. The bid would be for specialisations offered by the university and which, according to expert analyses, would allow for an “adjustment of the structure of tertiary education to social needs, especially the job market” (E&Y/IBnGR, p. 85). A potential problem with such a bureaucratic-expert mechanism of grantmaking is:

(II) A structure of tertiary education which is inadequate to the requirements of the economy **because of its expert, non-market character of defining the structure itself.** (E&Y/IBnGR, p. 85)

An expert character of prognoses on what specialisations are to be commissioned by the state:

(III) Results in the possibility of **errors which do not occur when contracting based on market principles.** (E&Y/IBnGR, p. 119)

In the further part of the analysis, the risk is considered acceptable for the following reason:

(IV) **The functioning of market solutions in the area of tertiary education does not always lead to a structure of education which is optimal from the perspective of economic development.** [...] A large part of disadvantageous phenomena in tertiary education focuses on the segment of non-public schools whose functioning is similar to that of open market institutions. (E&Y/IBnGR, p. 120)

In the above excerpts, we see a situation in which the state calls for the launching of specialisations based on the interest of the “job market” or the economy – the actual consumers of university products. The market-oriented decision of the emergence of specialisations is presented as a solution that can potentially help avoid mistakes in the construction of the education structure resulting from the abovementioned, see excerpt III, centralised bureaucratic control and the source of the majority of problems facing the system nowadays, see excerpt IV. The apparent contradiction between the two excerpts is the result of there being two interpretations of “market solutions”. In the case of excerpt III, the definition relates to the market where the consumers’ role is played by employers and students play the role of the product, while excerpt IV defines students to be consumers and the educational service plays the part of the product.

According to E&Y/IBnGR, student consumerism is one of the reasons for the pathologisation of the structure of Polish higher education. The actor that can remedy the situation is the state, undertaking the role of an intermediary and shaping the education according to academia in accordance with the interest of the actual client of the universities (job market, economy) at the same time not allowing for

a deformation of the structure of education if the students – in this case, the product – is placed in the position of a client.

KRASP's document provides a similar assessment of the situation. While summarising the results of the abovementioned OECD report on the state of tertiary education in Poland, the authors write:

(V) The didactic offer of tertiary schools is decided upon based on supply, while the communication with the job market ranges from weak to non-existent. (KRASP, p. 48)

One of the earlier excerpts analysing the structure of education supply and demand reads:

(VI) The market [...] needs specialists in technical, mathematical, and physical sciences, and universities, when shaping their educational offer, do little to take this information into account, instead following the **expectations of secondary school graduates**. The financial condition of universities is also a factor – the selective character of the specialisation offer is a major consequence of the costs of education. (KRASP, p. 44)

According to KRASP, the inadequate structure of education is a consequence of secondary school graduate demand, insufficient financial support of the state which results in universities launching “low-cost” specialisations, and lack of communication with the “job market” which is caused by its “lack of transparency” (KRASP, p. 44). Therefore, the actual problem is excess information from the market where the students act as the client, and insufficient information from the market where the students act as a product.

The discrepancy between the two interpretations lies mainly in the adequacy, or rather lack of adequacy, of their state funding – it is an element that KRASP considers as one of the main negative factors impacting Polish higher education, both in respect to the quality of education and science. Convergence of the two opinions is expressed in the division of markets into two types – irrational markets that distort the structure of education, where students buy educational services on one side, and the rational job market whose information ought to shape the supply of specialisations on the other.

The solutions to this situation are different in both the reports. The bureaucratic-expert supervision of the ministries as proposed by E&Y/IBnGR necessitates the creation of a list of specialisations without the participation of the universities, job market, and educational market. On the other hand, KRASP sees the way of changing the structure of education by:

(VII) [Cooperation] of the universities with employers, representatives of trade organisations and associations, and public life institutions where university organs undertake decisions related to the study process and programme. (KRASP, p. 73)

(VIII) The missions of individual tertiary schools will be decided autonomously **in cooperation with external stakeholders** but at the same time diversified in order to

adjust the functioning of the school to its own vision of development, including the academic profile and areas of education as well as to **social needs and preferences of candidates**. (KRASP, p. 64)

According to this solution, schools are autonomous actors whose decision-making process takes into account information from the job market as well as the consumer preferences of students.

The latter does not change the fact that the goal of both actors is to present such a vision of the structure of higher education in which the other actors will be to some degree deprived of subjectivity – those will be universities and students from the perspective of the strategy prepared for the Ministry and the state, and students from the viewpoint of the KRASP strategy. The goal of the authors of both strategies is to define the situation in a way according to which they, or their clients, are the interpreters of signals that come from the job market, whereas the job market is treated as the sole source of social rationality. In both the strategies, the presentation of the mechanism according to which students, deprived of the part of their subjectivity coming from their status as consumers will be shaped according to the needs of other social actors. According to both documents, one of the main elements of the imagined structure of the future university is the systems that serve for the “product” – in the current system, one which is deforming the structure of education by making consumer choices – to be controlled, directed, and divided into varied categories.

Fantasies of control

The main issue that the authors of both strategies needed to face was the inability of having the market and competition, as elements that would automatically solve the problem of the structure of education, included into their imaginaria of higher education. Market solutions were preferred during the transformation of Poland, and market fundamentalism²⁸, a significantly weaker way than in the Western states from the onset of the “great recession” of 2008–2012, is still a dominant ideological perspective in Poland²⁹. Traces of this ideological approach can be found in E&Y/IbnGR’s strategy, where the critique of educational markets’ shaping of the structure of education (excerpt III) can be read a page after a ritual confirmation of the advantage of market solutions over bureaucratic ones, of no consequence to the rest of the argumentation (excerpt II). According to the theory of the dependence on resources³⁰, the influence of the organisation’s environment is

²⁸ G. Soros, *The Crisis of Global Capitalism: Open Society Endangered*, Public Affairs, New York 1998; J. E. Stiglitz, *Globalisation and its Discontents*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London 2002.

²⁹ T. Kowalik, *www.polskatransformacja.pl*, Warszawskie Wydawnictwo Literackie Muza SA, Warsaw 2009.

³⁰ J. Pfeffer, G. Salancik, *The External Control of Organizations: A Resource Dependence Perspective*, Stanford Business Books, Stanford 2003.

associated with the degree to which the survival of the organisation depends on the diversified resources gained through the contact of the subject organisation with others. The structure, as described both by the KRASP and the E&Y/IBnGR reports, indicates that universities are dependent on the state and fee-paying students. The state does not exert adequate influence on the dependent organisations because the funds are divided according to an algorithm which does not rely on the effects of the activity of the universities or because they are divided through a grant system run by non-political expert bodies. On the other hand, students exert major influence on universities through market mechanisms. It is a pathological influence because instead of leading to the emergence of specialisations according to the needs of the actual “clients” (employees) for the actual “products” (the qualified workforce), the universities need to sell their educational services to secondary school graduates who have no knowledge of what the state’s economy needs (excerpts V and VI). An attempt to visualise the regulation of such a system is complex because universities are not directly financially dependent on enterprises, the job market, the economy, etc. – their “real” clients do not have any influence over the structure of education. Both strategies contain preliminary ideas for solving this problem and both were described in the previous section of this paper. The first, present in the strategy that calls for specialisations to be requested by the state, would significantly lower the academic freedom, reducing it to the “freedom” of properly executing tasks commissioned by the subjects which are external to academia. The second solution, offered by the academic authorities, would in turn limit the influence of the state on the universities – the state would be separated from the managing of the universities by a network of apolitical expert bodies, and the role of the interpreter of the needs of the economy would be taken over by the tertiary schools themselves. The dispute on power and subjectivity is not related to students, as both strategies agree as to the need of limiting the students’ influence. In order to achieve this, the imaginaria of control systems are created where excess, irrational consumer freedom would give way to meticulous control in accordance with the needs of the actual clients of higher education.

KRASP

The control system according to KRASP’s strategy takes into account an interaction of five actors – tertiary schools, the state, secondary schools, the job market, and the knowledge economy. The state is to serve an advisory and informative function, with its goal as follows:

- (IX) To assure universal accessibility of information on:
- current state of the job market, including the differences in the earnings of the graduates of individual [...] schools;
 - the forecast, in a few years’ perspective, of the needs of the job market and the salary ranges in different professions;

- long-term forecasts of the job market [...] and supporting the institutionalised forms of counselling and assistance in career planning, aimed primarily at secondary school students but also tertiary school students. (KRASP, p. 74)

The state's activity would therefore be limited to providing information on the prospective choices from the viewpoint of the students, which would allow them to make "rational" decisions based on salary information.

The role of the tertiary schools is wider and is to include interactions with future students already in primary and secondary schools, as well as co-shaping the educational experience in the primary and secondary schools:

(X) Popularising different forms of "pre-matura" education [...] that would serve to better prepare students for tertiary education and to increase the **motivation to undertake studies in those areas which do not enjoy sufficient interest of candidates** but are important from the viewpoint of **fulfilling social goals** – especially the development of the knowledge-based economy. (KRASP, p. 74)

Encouraging students to enrol in less popular courses from the market perspective would also be associated with financial incentives:

(XI) Applying incentives to students in order for them to undertake studies in those **areas which are important for social and economic reasons**, in the form of material aid solutions. (KRASP, p. 74)

Encouraging students to undertake education in specialisations that "are important for social and economic reasons" is synonymous with supporting those specialisations which draw little interest on the educational market and which are more expensive for universities to run in the areas of nature, engineering and the technical sciences. This activity coexists with the vision of the developing knowledge-based economy – a segment which is elite and yet practically non-existent in Poland, whose emergence would be supported by universities in liaison with the state and industry. The mission of constructing the new economy is different from the actions whose goal is to prepare students for the "actual" job market, which requires a different set of skills. The diagnosis of the current situation reads:

(XII) Some skills sought after by the employers have never been the object of interest of many universities and still are insufficiently noticed [...] The skill of studying and the drive to raise one's qualifications are valid arguments in favour of employing a graduate, even if their subject or specialist knowledge do not completely match the company's profile. Entrepreneurship is also vital, as self-employment, which universities ought to promote, is a major part of the future job market. (KRASP, p. 45)

Ensuring convergence between the skills of the students and the actual job market requires cooperation with the latter, and, unlike with the E&Y/IBnGR document, ought to be a cooperation of equal partners, not the subordination of academia to state expertises, where the state acknowledges the needs of the economy on its own.

The division of the economy into two parts, where one is the knowledge-based economy, i.e. the common project of the state, the universities, and industry, and the other is the job market with its rather limited requirements, corresponds with the division of education into two paths – mass and elite. This differentiation is identified with the introduction, as part of the Bologna Process, of the first and second cycle frameworks of tertiary education. According to KRASP's strategy, "soft" methods of the differentiating of those levels are suggested, in order to assign an elite character to master's degree studies:

(XIII) Raising of the level of education in the second cycle programmes by limiting the percentage of students undertaking the said cycle directly upon the completion of the first cycle, with the use of administrative methods and through "hard" selection of candidates is unreal and would not be proper. Therefore, an evolutionary approach is necessary, that would shape the proper image of competences of first cycle graduates among the employers. (KRASP, p. 80)

The situation in which most students graduate with a master's degree is considered pathological from the viewpoint of the Bologna Process, but persuasive or educational activity is to be directed not only towards students but also towards employers. Students are to be motivated to undertake unpopular specialisations and employers to lower their requirements of employee education.

The overall picture of the KRASP strategy indicates the drive towards universities retaining their autonomy – their interactions with the environment are to be voluntary, partner-like, and non-mediated, and the state is to serve only in advisory and coordinating capacities. Pathologies from the educational service market are to be limited with the use of "soft" persuasion and educational methods. A vital part is played by specific "education on education" where the involvement of tertiary schools in the education process starts at the primary level, progressing through the lower to higher secondary schools. The goal of these interventions is to direct the future students so that their choices satisfy all the complexes of social rationality – both the existent ones, such as the job market, as well as the future ones, namely, the knowledge-based economy. The final goal of education is therefore to produce functional elements of the society, preceded by making the elements aware of what it means to be properly functional. This means that the perspective of the strategy entails that the general population is not capable of performing rational assessment of their needs and that the only sources of rationality are the market (the entrepreneurs), experts forming opinions on the market, and the experience of higher-developed countries, all enclosed on such imaginaria as the knowledge-based economy, together with the actions of the subjects whose goal is the implementation of such imaginaria (schools, companies, state agencies). At the same time, the introduction of "soft" control mechanisms ought not to be connected with limitations but rather with the increase of tertiary schools' autonomy. One of the elements that was not included in this general vision is the criterion of the distinction that allows to classify students into groups that would

form mass and elite material. This distinction criterion is the centre of control fantasy according to E&Y/IBnGR.

E&Y/IBnGR

The division of students into a number of groups that receive education of varying quality is one of the fundamental goals of the E&Y/IBnGR strategy:

(XIV) Schools are to ensure education suitable for the graduates to undertake various jobs: from **routine mental work** (the so-called “mental labourers”) through **socially-useful** tasks (medicine, education) to scientific discovery and creating technological innovations. (E&Y/IBnGR, p. 46)

The lowest level of education – multidisciplinary bachelor programmes – are, according to the strategy, equivalents of the American college studies:

(XV) Multidisciplinary programmes ought to contain subjects from various areas of knowledge (the requirement of diversity) and focus on the shaping of **transitive skills** which are needed in performing **various jobs**. (E&Y/IBnGR, p. 48)

Their goal, according to the referenced model, is to train the lowest class of unspecialised mental employees, ready to change their jobs often. These skills are analogous to those whose acquisition is postulated in KRASP’s strategy as the reaction to the needs of the actual job market (excerpts XII and XIII).

In their justification of the introduction of multidisciplinary courses, with their scope extending beyond the job market, the authors also quote didactic goals:

(XVI) The postponement of the selection of a specialisation, allowing the students to assess their potential and to use it to the fullest. As the research indicates, **the selection of a specialisation is mostly dictated by the opinions of others (teachers, peers, parents)**. Postponing this selection and allowing for a wide range of general education **gives chances to better understand the consequences of the choice and becoming independent of the opinion of the environment, which is especially important because of the drive towards levelling educational opportunities**. (E&Y/IBnGR, p. 50)

(XVII) Independent development of one’s study programme which **teaches responsibility for one’s educational and life choices**, allows to develop interests, and shapes the ability to learn. (E&Y/IBnGR, p. 50)

Thanks to these didactical processes, students of the mass type, the future knowledge workers, should have increased chances of assessing their prospects in the job market. The assumed inability of bachelor study graduates to perform proper self-assessment of prospects (which has certain analogies to the KRASP strategy, but there it relates to the whole population of students, see excerpts VI, X, and XI) can be the result of the low intellectual, social, and financial capital of the

group of their potential clients, included in the strategy. One of the later fragments reads:

(XVIII) Assigning proper status to first cycle studies and the bachelor's degree is of key importance to the process of levelling educational opportunities and to the **efficient use of human capital in the economy**. On one hand, **people coming from groups with lower social and economic status** may consider the perspective of two-cycle studies excessively long, especially if these are fee-paying studies. On the other hand, the competences gained during the first cycle are often sufficient to undertake a position in a variety of professions based on mental work. (E&Y/IBnGR, p. 54)

The didactic process, as intended by E&Y/IBnGR, should therefore allow students from lower classes to rationally recognise their own, class-determined paths of life, and take responsibility for them.

Unlike with multidisciplinary bachelor's programmes, the possibility to undertake second- and third-cycle studies (master's and doctoral programmes) would be limited in order to raise the significance of those courses:

(XIX) In Poland, the share of second-cycle students in the whole population of students is significantly higher than in the other OECD countries. First-cycle education ought therefore to be open to a rising share of secondary school graduates, and **second-cycle studies ought to become a selectively accessible commodity for the best**. (E&Y/IBnGR, pp. 54–55)

Unlike people of low material and social status, whose destiny is to assume the posts of knowledge labourers, the best students do not require, according to E&Y/IBnGR, additional didactic processes, since it is their destiny to assume more privileged and responsible positions within the social hierarchy. The main goal of didactic processes is therefore to limit rather than to stimulate or, like in KRASP's strategy, to direct the educational ambition.

The strategy suggests that there ought to arise a lack of obstruction between individual levels of education:

(XX) A graduate of any programme type may apply for any programme of a higher cycle. [...] When transferring from a lower cycle to a higher one [...], the university would be able to state what range of competences of candidates would be assessed in an entry exam. In order to decrease the obstruction between individual groups of programmes, schools would be able to offer **paid compensation courses** (cf. 7.E) that would allow the candidates to bridge the gaps in knowledge and competences that are required to undertake studies at the programme of their choice. (E&Y/IBnGR, p. 49)

The "lack of obstruction" between levels of education is therefore connected with introducing a double barrier – administrative, associated with the need to pass exams, and financial. Thus, despite the possibility of transferring between study cycles, the chances of attaining the "elite" forms of education by people of low social and economic status is, according to E&Y/IBnGR, limited to yet a greater degree.

Compared to KRASP's strategy which offers "soft" shaping of the students' choices based on the agreement of elite social actors, the strategy offered by E&Y/IBnGR includes a wider range of social goals.

First, it assumes that the right form of subjectivisation of students is to persuade them to internalise their class position. One of the goals of schools meant for them is to enable the students to make a "free" choice of what is deemed necessary by the authors of the strategy.

Second, in the three-cycle structure of studies, as introduced in the Bologna Process, the strategy sees a chance to reconstitute the distinctive function of education, limited by the phenomenon of "diploma inflation" in the light of the "excessive" number of second-cycle students and lack of diversification of schools according to their quality³¹.

Third, a specific innovation of the E&Y/IBnGR strategy is the notion of "efficiency of the utilisation of human capital", see excerpt XVIII which entails directing people with lower or higher entry human capital to, respectively, less or more demanding and prestigious education paths. Although such interventions are actually "efficient" in the sense that training people with human capital deficits to do lower-ranking jobs, while training more privileged individuals for more demanding tasks, requires lower outlays as well as "wastes" less of the existing capital, the goal, in the presented form, can be considered synonymous with a top-planned, rigid reproduction of the existing class structure of the society.

Conclusion

The limitations of the present study come from two sources. First, from defining the subjectivity of students only in the context of the role of students as consumers of educational services, and second, from the status of the analysed documents, forming the declarations of parties to a political debate which has been ultimately solved in a way which did not owe much to any of the subject documents. I still claim that in the light of the positive effects of the liberalisation of Polish higher education, the almost openly hostile approach of a number of social actors towards the fundamental effects of the said liberalisation – assigning a mass character to higher education – is worthy of analysing, even if the analysis is of intentions rather than effects. At the same time, there is no better material that can be used as the source of insight into the intentions of the individual social actors in relation to higher education than the materials produced during the debate on the current reform.

Both the analysed visions are of a conservative character. KRASP's project assumes the protection of academic autonomy from student consumer choices,

³¹ The classical description can be found in P. Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1990.

while the version presented by E&Y/IBnGR attempts to formulate an image of a society whose class structure is protected from any excessive ambition of the lower classes and the devaluation of traditional sources of rationality by the advantage of the privileged. Subjectivity, understood as the subjectivity of a consumer rather than a person or a citizen, needs to be transformed into a controllable subjectivity with the help of complex social machinery so that it does not pose a threat to the social institutions valued by the authors of the individual documents. According to KRASP's strategy, it is the subjectivity of a functional element of the market economy, instructed as to what the rationality of social machinery requires of them and constructing their life story based on this understanding. E&Y/IBnGR visualises class subjectivity, allowing for all the individual members of the community to understand where their designated place within the social pyramid is, even if this understanding needs to be accomplished despite excess ambitions awakened by their "teachers, peers, parents". What is perhaps most paradoxical in both the strategies is the combination of their hierarchical conservatism and the strategy of a top-down control based on the arrangement between the elites, with the added concepts of the knowledge-based economy that call for the diffusion of knowledge and the "creative destruction"³² of the existing social structures; an added element is the existence of trust between the cooperating groups of knowledge producers³³. Although in the light of the ongoing crisis one may doubt in the fairness of any economic theories, at the same time it is difficult to envision a social model which would be less adapted to the potential growth of the knowledge economy than a class society, meticulously reproduced according to the plans plotted by the elites, recognising the people's ambition as a threat to the shape of its institutions and the legitimisation of their social standing. The authors, fending mostly for their static visions of society, seem to forget that the contemporary markets of new technology grew out of conversations held in garages rather than in parlours.

Summary

The Status of Students at the University of the Future – an Analysis of the Main Documents of the Debate on Polish Higher Education Reform

The actors taking part in the public debate concerning the current higher education reform in Poland had diverse interests but they operated in a fairly homogenous field of ideology/discourse. For the dominant actors such as the Polish state and the academic leadership, the ideologies/discourses of Knowledge-Based Economy, New Public Management and market fundamentalism determined what could and could not be said. United in ideology, the dominant groups struggled for power – trying to define the fu-

³² J. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, Routledge, 2003, chapter VII.

³³ B.A. Lundvall, *The Social Dimension of the Learning Economy*, DRUID, Aalborg University, Aalborg 1996.

ture management and financial structures of higher education institutions in line with their interests.

This paper is based on an analysis of two strategic documents that had a large impact during the debate. The first document was produced by the Rectors Conference, the second one by Ernst&Young Business Advisory and The Gdansk Institute for Market Economics (on behalf of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education). The aim in researching these documents was to determine how the dominant actors conceptualized the future position of students – an actor that had a limited impact on the debate.

In both documents the students are defined as irrational social subjects, whose influence as consumers should be restricted for the good of the industry and the higher education institutions. The students' position is redefined from that of the 'client' to that of the 'product' of higher education – which allows for the positioning of the "labour market" and "knowledge-based economy" as the real clients of the universities. Because of the differentiated needs of the new clients, the product of higher education institutions is to be divided into two categories. The first of them is the "mass product" that is destined for the currently existing labour market and is to be created by processing the lower-class human material. The second category is the "luxury product" that is destined for the prestigious professions and the not yet existent knowledge-based economy.

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