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in Poland**

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DOMINIK ANTONOWICZ

## **THE CHALLENGES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH IN POLAND**

Research on higher education has a relatively short history, although issues concerning the role of university and academic scholars have been in the center of academic discourse since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In many countries universities attracted the attention of the greatest scholars who share their views on what needs to be done in order to preserve the unique role of a university. But as an area of research “higher education” is a relatively new phenomenon in Europe, though in America enjoys a longer history. While in most Western European countries until the 1960s universities remained small, elite, autonomous and largely unexplored institutions, in the US Carnegie Foundation runs a number of research projects since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore in Western Europe, only a few serious policy documents based on empirical data were published until the late 1970s among them was the English Robbins Report and the Swedish U-68 (1968). A similar situation applied to Poland in which higher education did not attract research attention. In general, as long as a small number of universities cost national budgets a small amount of public money and had little influence on economic development there was no need for intensive research in higher education. It has all changed with the mass expansion of higher education because it has turned out to be an important challenge for public policy. In addition, the arrival of a post-industrial economy transformed higher education into “a billion dollar enterprise”. An educated society became a highly valued asset of economic development, a fundamental part of civic society that contributes to the well being of its members. Hence, the demand for research in higher education has grown in order to provide knowledge and information for universities operating in highly competitive environments. Most importantly the need for knowledge has also been expressed by national governments which bear the responsibility for higher education policy.

This paper tries to address the issue of research in higher education in Poland. By doing so, it will briefly refer to philosophical discourse in universities in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Europe and look critically at early research efforts that explored higher education. Furthermore, the paper will investigate the reasons behind the expansion of research in higher education in Europe. It will pay special attention to the emergence of a new form of knowledge “mode 2” that revolutionized the interdisciplinary approach to research conducted in higher education. In the final part, the paper demonstrates the rise and fall of higher education research in Poland but it also will try to foresee its development in the future.

### **Philosophical reflection of the university**

The philosophical discourse on the idea of universities involved some of the most notable names in academia of the 19th and the 20th century among which included Wilhelm von Humboldt, John Newman, Ortega y Gasset, Karl, Jaspers, Immanuel Kant, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim and Jürgen Habermas. They had a tremendous impact on modern thinking about university. Also, in Polish universities the autonomy and relation with the modern state attracted some of the great thinkers of the century such as Sergiusz Hassen, Kazimierz Twardowski, Tadeusz Czyżowski, Stanisław Ossowski, Józef Chałasiński or Leszek Kołakowski (see: Drozdowicz eds. 2008, Hejwosz 2010, Melosik 2002, Antonowicz 2002, 2005). They expressed their deep concern about role of academic institutions in a dynamically changing social and economic environment. By and large, university returns to the mainstream of scholarly debate most often in the context of feelings of crises and critical assessment of changes in academic institutions. Still, within the Western, humanistic context, late modernity’s John Henry Newman, José Ortega y Gasset, and Clark Kerr reflect upon the institutional mission. Newman’s *The Idea of a University* (1873) is a defence of teaching the liberal arts against organized research. In the *Mission of the University* (1944), Ortega y Gasset wanted to exclude research, focusing instead on liberal and professional education and he heavily criticized the concept of mass university in which he saw nothing more than the denial of the traditional idea of university and its unique values.

Furthermore, his criticism was also focused on growing specialization of university education and research that stood at odds with what he believed to be a university mission: building culture, bringing new ideas for society and independent thinking. According to Gasset (1944) a university was meant to be an elite institution, standing above society and educating its elites. He protested against growing specialization in teaching students which in his view inevitably led to producing barbarians that are completely ignorant to anything outside their narrow field of study. Gasset (1944) despised the idea of a very narrow and specialized education as it stayed at odds with the mission of university. Narrow and specialized education can produce only blind followers while university was established to create leaders who would be able to develop their own independent way of thinking and establish their hierarchy of values. For the Spanish thinker the university that produces applicable knowledge, educate experts undermines its fundamental values and betrays its mission.

Since the beginning of the 19th century till the late 1970s most scientific discourse on the role of the university in society was limited to philosophical deliberation on the idea of university, its mission, identity, academic values and teaching in academic institutions. The excellent work of Habermas and Blazek (1987), Gasset (1944) or Bloom (1987) demonstrates great care about the university and personal commitment to its mission which they found absolutely fundamental for modern civilization. On the other hand the debate about the idea of university was descriptive, and held at a blue sky level. An analogous situation was apparent in Poland, since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the university became an important subject of national academic debate in which participated not only the most noble scholars but also politicians and clergy. Usually, they took part in various official university ceremonies such as inaugurations, holiday of university' patrons, students' graduation or awarding doctoral honours and deliver occasional speeches at the university. Naturally, they neither were based on empirical data nor followed any methodological guidelines. Instead, they referred to what all these distinctive figures believed that should make a university a unique and extraordinary institution. Politically such statements were strong and symbolic but their contribution to existing knowledge about higher education was insignificant.

## **Toward a more comprehensive and empirical approach to research in higher education**

It is difficult to point a particular moment in history in which philosophical and political discourse evolved into more systematic and empirical based research. This was a long and complex process which happened differently in various countries and it varied from one academic discipline to another. The expansion of higher education took off earlier in the US and its higher education was the first to become a subject of more comprehensive and empirical research. Among the most important books in the field one needs to mention Thorstein Veblen's (1965) *The Higher Learning in America* published in 1918. Richards (1969) claims that higher education became an interesting field particularly for research for the sociology of education. Although due to a small number of institutions and students it remained outside the major research focus which was directed towards growing elementary education. Only in the 1920s the attention of some social societies was moved from university *per se* towards various aspects of its functions such as the transmission of culture, socialization and social control (Durkheim 1922, Cooley 1956, Ross 1928, Ward 1906). In addition, in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, important books were published such as Max Weber's (1922) work *Science as a Vocation* or *The Rationalization of Education and Training* (1946) in the latter Weber points out the inevitable conflict between the "specialist type of man" with the traditional "cultivated man" (Weber 1946:43). Despite their great contribution there were only isolated attempts that did not spark much interest in their followers. During the 1940s and the 1950s there was no major breakthrough in research on higher education which would attract much of scholarly attention regardless of the growing expansion on higher education in the US. The major focus was still very much on the academic and his/her work which is perfectly reflected in title of the book published by Logan Wilson (1942) *The Academic Man: a study of the sociology of a profession* followed by work done by Theodor Caplow and Reece McGee (1958) *The academic marketplace*.

Since the 1930s the research focus was gradually moving toward students whose growing number became an issue for public policy at least in the US. The issue of university access became one of the most important topics in American sociology of education. Initially, there were minor and local empirical attempts that investigated the access to

higher education institutions in regional contexts (Lynd & Lynd 1929, 1937). They wanted to expose the hidden mechanism of selection to higher education in which gender, class, ethnicity and skin colour played a determining role. In other words the aim was to explore the recruitment process to (particularly elite) in higher education institutions. This sparked growing interest in more comprehensive empirical research with stronger theoretical background which produced a bulk of publications all over the world in the late 1960s and 1970s. (E.g. Bourdieu and Passerson 1977, Collins, 1979). Growing interest in expanding higher education did not only cover (a) social structure of students and academics but also went in two other main directions such as (b) methods of university education (c) sociology of knowledge, knowledge production, relation between knowledge and power as well as knowledge as a mechanism of social control (Clark 1973).

### **Expansion of higher education as a key step to the emancipation of research in higher education in Europe**

The revolution in research in higher education took place with the transformation from the elite to a mass model of higher education. It took place in the US and later on in the 1960s in Western Europe and in the 1990s in countries that were behind the iron curtain. As Jan Sadlak Director of the UNESCO-European Center for Higher Education (1981) described it perfectly as a demand for research in higher education increased because of the changing external environment produced a huge demand for it. With the growing importance of higher education public authorities expressed their demand for more comprehensive empirically based knowledge about higher education since its growth was mainly funded by taxpayer's money. The post-industrial economy and society required pulling down the ivory tower and thus engaging higher education in social and economic development. The elite model of higher education embraced a small number of autonomous institutions that were situated on the peripheries of public policy and economy (Trow 1970). Although universities performed an important scientific, educational and elitist role its impact on mainstream society and economic development was limited at least in the European context. The post-war academic discourse about universities started to question the elitist role of universities that serve only a few privileged individuals and not society as a whole. There was a growing awareness that

universities could no longer sustain being “an ivory tower”. Ironically, growing criticism arose on both sides of the iron curtain, although the ideological rational of this criticism was different. In Western Europe, this growing dissatisfaction with university performance led to the student’s revolution of 1968 that turned higher education upside down. It started the rapid expansion of higher education that transformed it into education for the masses and furthermore universal model of higher education (Trow 1970). It was supported by human capital theory which sees knowledge, skills and competences as key assets for economic development, growing employment and reducing social inequalities (Schultz 1971; Becker 1964). The elite model of higher education could stay outside the mainstream research focus and remain a subject of philosophical reflection on the idea and mission of university. It had to be changed with the beginning of the mass expansion of higher education. It did not only embrace a growing number of students, academics and higher education institutions but also – as Peter Scott (1995) refers to it - the complex process of a changing structure and the means of the functioning of higher education (and individual institutions) which had profound consequences in a European context. External pressure to expand higher education must have imposed a revolution also inside higher education institutions with respect to design and the teaching of curricula. In the elite model in which less than 15% of age cohort access universities the traditional structure of academic programs could be maintained, although if almost half of an age cohort entered university education this traditional structure seemed to be not enough to accommodate a massive number of students.

Programs based on academic disciplines such as chemistry, physics, maths, philosophy or sociology must have been fragmented in more narrower and specialized teaching programs which also required more specialized, detailed or technical knowledge to be offered by higher education institutions. The expansion produced a further fragmentation of the education on offer and development of specific programs oriented on teaching practical knowledge. On the top of it, a growing demand for education increased a number of academics (much less than students, though) and led to the further fragmentation of higher education institutions and a multiplication of their units. Increasing employment in higher education was motivated by the growing number of students. However, a majority of academics tend to perform both teaching and research duties, so newly developed teaching programs translated into non-traditional research



topics. Added to this, these newly employed academics must also conduct some research in their narrow areas of expertise. In other words, the mass expansion of higher education contributed also to the fragmentation of academic research. Furthermore, according to Metzger (1987) or Burton Clark (1996) it also translates into increasing the amount of knowledge produced at universities that is measured by the number of publications (books and peer reviewed articles). For example, Clark identifies the gradual increase in research outcomes around 4-8% each year. Only in the social sciences can one identify a wide range of various areas of research and teaching such as public policy, administration gender studies, educational studies, development studies or deaf studies. They create lots of opportunities for research projects. Gradually, the studies in new areas went beyond a descriptive analysis and produced new theoretical paradigms and their own methods of conducting research. However, for the purpose of this study it must be underlined that research in higher education did not belong to this group since there was little demand for teaching in this area. As a result “higher education” remained as sub disciplines of pedagogy, sociology or public management.

### **New type of knowledge for a new type of society**

Higher education oriented on providing teaching services made it difficult to develop research performance in fields that did not attract extensive numbers of students. The expansion of higher education led to a narrowing of education programs and fragmentation of university structure. “There is no obvious field in the established disciplines that address higher education. Nor is research in higher education strongly supported for practical purposes because most academics in the field of higher education do not always base their decisions and actions on systematic knowledge. Over the last four decades, however, research on higher education has gradually created a body of knowledge which deserves attention” (Teichler 2005:447).

It was due to fact, that higher education in the 1970s almost entirely relied on income from teaching services (provided by the state or students). University structure had to fit the purpose and so did academic research by developing into increasingly narrow fields of study. There was still little space for research in higher education since it had little chance for development within the structure of teaching oriented universities.

Paradoxically, despite unfavourable conditions this period was marked as a turning point for research in higher education and the beginning of its dynamic development. This unexpected rise stemmed from the new social phenomenon of mass expansion of higher education which attracted a great deal of attention in areas of research. Also, since the late 1960s European governments did not request neither knowledge or expertise regarding higher education which consisted of a small number of autonomous institutions often governed by its own rules which were rooted in academic tradition. It was believed that universities knew best how to use their money and as long as higher education remained small and elite, and did not cost an extravagant amount of public money compared to other welfare state commitments. “For two reasons, the continued viability of the existing welfare state edifice is being questioned across the whole of Europe. The first is simply that the status quo will be difficult to sustain given the adverse demographic or financial conditions. The second is that the same status quo appears increasingly out-of-date and ill suited to meet the great challenges ahead” (Esping-Andersen et al. 2002: 4). But the massive expansion became an important item in the national budget which could not be ignored by governments. On top of this, the governments made strong claims about the accountability of higher education with respect to the rocketing number of graduates and production of knowledge which became a valuable asset in a post industrial economy. The mass expansion of higher education that in the 1970s transformed universities into higher education systems and furthermore into key sectors for the dynamic growth of a post-industrial economy. “Massification is itself part of the post industrial shift, because universities and colleges will form an increasing significant component of the service dominated economy. They are no longer ‘external’ to that economy as, arguably, they were to an industry-based economy” (Scott 1995:94). In addition, the high level of participation in higher education required growing public and private spending on both education and research. It increased the demand for information, knowledge and systematic research in higher education. Yet, scientific discourse in higher education departs from individual, isolated works, unstructured philosophical reflection that occupy peripheries of social sciences toward systematic, international, empirical and comparative research projects in which a leading role is played by transnational economic and political organizations. In other words, higher education was too important to be left by itself.

Without understanding the social dynamics of higher education governments could design and evaluate any form of policy. And neither philosophical nor historical reflections (so popular in the area of higher education) could provide good answers for the questions that should be addressed for the well-being of society. Instead, it required solid and empirical based knowledge that would help to understand the social dynamics behind the rapid expansion and support policy makers. It is also worth underling that – referring to Drucker (1969) - the demand for research in higher education stemmed from the growing significance of theoretical knowledge in a post-industrial economy which became a comparative advantage from enterprises on the market and which were fundamental for the design policy in the public realm. Drucker (1969) predicted a growing demand for theoretical knowledge in the so called knowledge field. The key issue is that a post-industrial economy required a new type of knowledge that would help to address problems existing outside the ivory tower. It was significantly different from traditionally, investigator-initiated and discipline-based knowledge labelled as ‘mode 1’. But growing external pressure and raising financial opportunities for research and consultancy outside the world of academia required a new type of knowledge interdisciplinary and problem-focused area. As Camilie Limoges (1996:14-15) put it – “we now speak of 'context-driven' research, meaning 'research carried out in a context of application, arising from the very work of problem solving and not governed by the paradigms of traditional disciplines of knowledge’”. Tony Becher and Trowler (1998:7) would add also that that new type of knowledge is produced in the context of application in which transdisciplinarity is the norm. Overall, “mode 2” enhanced the social accountability of knowledge production, although it required a completely new approach to research and higher education. Michael Gibbons et al. (1994) suggests that the advent of ‘mode 2’ would terminate the form in the 19<sup>th</sup> century’s division of science in academic disciplines. It would be inevitably replaced by interdisciplinary and problem oriented knowledge because the world outside academia is not segmented as a university is into traditional academic disciplines. Problems that need scientific research to be addressed also require an interdisciplinary approach that is hard to achieve under a traditional university structure. They require cooperation between academics from various disciplines, combining different theoretical paradigms and methodological approaches which are determined by the context of knowledge application. “Such knowledge is intended to be useful to someone whether in industry or government, or

society more generally and this imperative is present from the beginning. Knowledge is always produced under an aspect of continuous negotiation and it will not be produced unless and until the interests of various actors are included. Such is the context of application” (Gibbons et al 1994:4).

Real social problems tend to be complicated and often go beyond the explorative capacity of individual academics that are rooted into single academic disciplines. The Humboldtian structure of a university does not support interdisciplinary efforts since it consists of a number of smaller academic units (faculties and departments) based on disciplines. In this context research on higher education hardly fitted into any of these units because from the outset research was meant to produce interdisciplinary and problem-focused knowledge. “Although the ‘natural’ home of mode 2 knowledge appears to lie outside the university, Henry Etzkowitz and Leot Leydesdorff (1997) offer hope to academics. They refer to the ‘triple helix’ of academia–industry–government relations, which they see as a key component of any national or multinational innovation strategy in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In the contemporary context innovations are increasingly likely to develop holistically rather than in a linear fashion, to involve this triple helix, to be transnational and interdisciplinary” (Trowler and Becher 2001:8). Growing demands for the new generation of knowledge (mode 2 knowledge) interdisciplinary and applicable – could not be met by being fragmented into the silo structure of university departments in Europe. Research on higher education was the case. On the one hand governments in Western Europe required knowledge and expertise that help them to steer higher education but this type of knowledge and expertise, but on the other it could hardly be produced within fragmented (and largely isolated) university departments. Yet, the first two research centers on higher education and higher education policy were established somewhere on the periphery of a university or within the university but next to the existing departmental structure. The International Center for Higher Education Research (INCHER) was established in 1978 as an interdisciplinary research unit of the University of Kassel (Germany) and only since 1982 did it become a permanent unit of the University, and Center of Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS) founded in 1984 as an interdisciplinary research-institute at the School of Management and Governance of the University of Twente, the Netherlands. The governments decided to establish such research centers because there was no other

institution to provide expertise and applicable knowledge for governments with respect to higher education. The apparently existing universities were fragmented into single discipline departments and failed to do so. However, their ambiguous and awkward status as research centers provided them with certain autonomy but at the expense of financial instability due to the lack of educational services. Interdisciplinary research provoked many discussion about status of knowledge produced by centers of higher education research partly because researchers who abandoned their own disciplines and became - as Becher (1994) calls them – “scientific emigrants”.

### **The rise and fall of research into higher education research in Poland**

Higher education research in Poland has faced similar problems. It could not fit into the stiff structure of a traditional university, although the institutionalization of higher education research began even earlier than in Western Europe. Already in the 1960s comprehensive research into higher education was initiated in the inter-university research unit for research into higher education in Warsaw (Międzyuczelniany Zakładu Badań nad Szkolnictwem Wyższym) established by Jan Szczepański in the late 1960s. In 1973 a small unit was transformed into the Institute of Scientific Policy and Higher Education and received unusual legal status because it had double accountability, one to the Ministry of Higher Education and Research and the another to the Polish Academy of Science. The reason behind establishing such a center was the fact that the communist regime attached great importance to higher education. New socialist higher education was meant to be an integral part of the central system of planning and management (Chałasiński 1950) about which the government wanted to have solid expertise.

The importance of research in this area was hardly questioned and therefore the prime minister of Poland - Piotr Jaroszewicz (13/07/1973) transformed this basic research unit (Zakład) into a bigger and more respectable Institute of Scientific Policy, Higher Education, Technology (Instytut Polityki Naukowej, Szkolnictwa Wyższego, Techniki). This new research center had an ambiguous formal status because the direct supervision of the Institute was held by the Ministry of Science, Higher Education and Technology, although the accountability of the center was unclear and was spread between the Ministry and Polish Academy of Science. Its functioning was a subject to

agreement between the Minister of Science and Higher Education and the General Secretary of the Polish Academy of Science who informally played a role of Minister of Science in communist times. Later (1977) the Institute was renamed, “Instytut Polityki Naukowej, Postępu Technicznego i Szkolnictwa Wyższego” and received new tasks to perform including “perfecting system of application of research outcomes and technology transfer to the economy”. The Institute became an interdisciplinary and analytical research center closely linked to the Ministry. These strong boundaries with the Ministry did not stem only from its legal status but from the fact that the institute produced a bulk of books, paper and expertise for the government. The ministry expected applicable knowledge not philosophical reflections on the idea of university. Therefore, it should not be a surprise that the institute was directly financed by the Ministry. In the 1970s there was also another unit in the Polish Academic of Science that did some studies on science and partly also on higher education (Zakładu Prakseologii i Naukoznawstwa) but apparently it failed to provide an adequate form of knowledge and expertise that was expected by the government (see Białecki 2010).

There are also other factors that suggest the extraordinary status of the institute such as the following: the first director of the Institute Jan Kluczyński was not an academic but a former civil servant at the Ministry, in addition the Institute’s four year research plan had to be accepted by the appropriate Minister. Finally, most of research outcomes were produced to satisfy Ministerial needs and therefore most of them were published as reports for internal purposes. Only a few selected studies came as books or articles in peer review journals. Strong ties with the government put the institute in a very privileged position by providing access to comprehensive empirical data on science and higher education. Only a brief analysis of the titles of studies conducted by the institute indicate that any research conducted had an economic character but was meant to support medium and long term social and economic strategies. In a way, it reflected the logic of the social economy and had a deep belief in central planning. At the same time, publications produced by the institute almost largely ignored research on higher education conducted outside of Poland. In particular it did not refer to scientific discourse that was conducted on the other side of the iron curtain. Trying to summarize the massive analytical work done by the Institute one can say that the research outcomes of the Institute in the 1970s and 1980s can be characterized in the following way: research

conducted (a) had a strong interdisciplinary character, (b) was dominated by the analysis of statistical data collected by a centralized and bureaucratic state, (c) the analyses lacked theoretical reflections, (d) it largely ignored the state of the art in particular academic discourse outside of Poland; (e) books, papers and reports contained knowledge and expertise that was indeed very useful for policy makers.(e.g. Kluczyński 1986, Kluczyński, Kwiatkowski, Oehler 1989; Komorowski 1973; Glikman 1991).

The institute enjoyed its heyday in the late 1970s and 1980s and was generally perceived as a strong research center that employed over one hundred people. It produced a bulk of research analysis for the government, only a minor part of it was published as articles or books, though. A brief analysis of the titles of research conducted in 1971-1975 suggest that most of the problems explored were practical for the employment and career development of higher education graduates and the effectiveness of various types of higher education institutions. In short, the research tried to address the most burning problems of Polish higher education at the time. For the sake of analysis it is important to stress that the ambiguous legal status of the institute and close ties with central government helped to produce interdisciplinary and problem oriented knowledge with little application. It is probably due to the ideological principles of public policy that largely ignored knowledge and expertise produced by the Institute. Nevertheless, in the 1980s the institute was one of the biggest centers of research in higher education employing around 130 people. Neither before nor after any research center managed to reach comparable capacity with such a great human asset (Białecki 2010).

The beginning of the transformation brought the institute to the University of Warsaw as it was thought that research should be conducted in higher education. It stayed at the university until it was dissolved in 2011. The Paradox is that the decline of research in higher education and the fall of the institute took place exactly in the decades when higher education underwent the most dynamic changes in the post-war period. Since the 1990s Polish higher education has expanded massively. And over a fifteen year period (1990-2005) the number of students multiplied five times from 380,000 (1990) to 1,990,000 (2005) mostly due to the expansion of university research mission (Antonowicz, Gorlewski 2011). Most academics became over-occupied by extra teaching duties in dynamically growing private sector. It has had a tremendous impact on

research performance which experienced unprecedented decline (Kwiek, 2012), particularly in fields in which the growth of a number of students was the highest. Among these fields were also the social sciences. In the transformation period research centers operating as autonomous units of higher education institutions could add little value to educational portfolios at universities. In higher education 90% of its income generated by teaching performance at any research centers were in an uncomfortable situation. They could neither offer fancy and popular programs such as business, management or administration nor could they obtain serious research funding from the national research council (Komitet Badań Naukowych) since the latter could only provide a very insignificant amount of money. In addition, in the transforming Polish economy the state had a wide range of alternative, more politically sensitive goals than the development of science and in particularly basic research.

Unfortunately, contrary to the earlier situation in Western European countries in the 1970s, the Polish government in the 1990s did not think that the expansion of higher education would become a political challenge that would require professional knowledge based on empirical research. Instead, public policy was characterized as a “policy of non-policy” that obviously did not require any research. For the Research Institute of Scientific Policy and Higher Education this period was marked by the a steady decline of the Institute which was initially downgrade and reorganized as smaller university unit - the Center of Scientific Policy and Higher Education – to be finally dissolved by the rector of Warsaw University in 2012. But with Humboldtian model of a university based on traditional academic disciplines research on higher education faced institutional difficulties. Bureaucratically speaking there is no such a discipline as “higher education” and this is seriously challenged because “academic tribes and territories” do not produce an institutional environment for interdisciplinary research.

Furthermore, the national system of academic degrees mirrors disciplinary fragmentation at universities, yet, academic degrees and titles are also awarded in basic disciplines. Within existing institutional structures the development of research in higher education is difficult and one should not be surprised that in 40 million countries there are only two very small (employing up to ten academics on a project-based funding formula) inner university centers such as the respectable Center for Public Policy Studies at the



University of Poznan (opened in 2002), with a clear focus on international comparative higher education research and also the Higher Education Research Center at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow with a focus on university management. In addition, there is also a small center in a private higher education institution in Rzeszów without a single senior academic. Ironically, even KRASP - rectors' organizations - established its own research center that provides expertise of an interdisciplinary character for its internal purpose.

### **Tentative conclusions**

The future of research in higher education in Poland is hard to foresee. On one hand the world of science remains fragmented into a disciplinary silo structure and is petrified by the out of date bureaucratic logic. It builds barriers for the development of interdisciplinary projects. But on the other hand "higher education" is becoming too important and sensitive an issue for it to be treated as a peripheral one. In addition, the National Science Centers declare to support interdisciplinary projects that would address important social issues in innovative ways.

The structure of science and academic career promotion needs to be conducted within narrow areas of academic disciplines. The number of disciplines are increasing but departmentalism within science and higher education discourages transdisciplinary research projects. It is a serious challenge for early stage higher education researchers that need to position themselves within the existing structures of academic disciplines. Therefore, research in higher education tends to be developed either by well established researchers who are highly respected in international (interdisciplinary) research areas and whose work is legitimized by their position in the international community of higher education researchers. Or by those academics who also perform other - more disciplinary based – research duties and for whose research in higher education is a part of a wider research portfolio.

There is some light at the end of the tunnel though. In 2011 the Ministry approved a new discipline called "public policy" that will open a window opportunity for interdisciplinary research in higher education in the distant future when the discipline becomes more

institutionalized. As is the case with good wines, academic excellence requires a wealth of expertise, care and a long maturity period. Undoubtedly, in the future the government will need knowledge and expertise about higher education since it has already become an extremely politically sensitive issue that attracts massive attention from the mass media. Poland would probably follow a similar path as Germany, the Netherlands and the UK. It probably takes at least a decade before “public policy” will be recognized as a fully fledged research area at universities.

In addition higher education is becoming an intensively explored research area worldwide and the growing significance of higher education requires solid research. As Marek Kwiek, (2010: 22) described it “never in their post-war history have universities been analyzed, compared, and ranked from all possible angles of their functioning (research, teaching and various third missions) in so much detail. And also, never before have been universities as individual institutions and national higher education systems directly and indirectly, assessed by influential international analytical centers (such as e.g. the OECD or the World Bank)”.

Meanwhile in Poland dynamic changes of higher education are accompanied by growing criticism of mass expansion and also of raising the issue of its public accountability. Issues such as a decrease in the quality of teaching, high unemployment rate of graduates and the lack of knowledge transfer has already raised panic in the media. In addition, public pressure will only grow as the current demographic low will push many private higher institutions into bankruptcy (Antonowicz, Gorlewski 2011).

Governments have to face all of these challenges and will demand more empirical research and expertise in this field in order to develop an evidence based policy in higher education. There is little doubt that research concerning higher education is desperately needed and “mode 2” knowledge needs to be applied in order to address all of these burning issues. But this is only one side of the coin, there is also the need for “curiosity driven” research in higher education that will produce theoretical models and a better understanding of the social processes that take place in higher education. Knowledge regarding higher education requires much more than conducting a simple analysis of empirical data that could be done by almost any department of the Ministry of Science

and Higher Education. Without theoretical reflections research into higher education becomes shallow and descriptive. The future of higher education in Poland needs to balance the political pressure on producing “ready to use solutions” with curiosity driven empirical research supported by deep theoretical reflections. This appears to be truly a challenge for both the government and academics working in the field.

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