Polish Higher Education in the Period of Transition

Krzysztof OPOLSKI
Barbara BUCZYNSKA
Warsaw University - Poland

The evaluation of universities and its effects on the financing of higher education
SYMPTOMS OF CHANGE AND FEARS

Like the entire economic and social sphere, higher education is now in a state of considerable transformation. The rapidly expanding market economy and its neo-liberal colouring are exerting a tangible impact on higher education. It is starting to assume the following characteristics:

- Opening of the opportunities to privatize academic schools. Apart from the traditionally private Lublin Catholic University, four private schools have been recently founded in the areas of business management as well as finance and insurance, sponsored by western capital. It may be expected that other schools will be established soon.

- Supporting (expanding) school budgets by introducing charges for adult studies (monthly fees at this type of courses are slightly lower than the average monthly pay) for repeat examinations and post-graduate courses. Higher schools also organize (against payment) short educational courses (up to three months) upgrading or updating the qualifications of people employed in various sectors of the economy.

Financial economies are also sought in the area of social assistance to students, considerably reducing and sometimes eliminating it altogether (e.g. commercialization of student hostels, non-indexing of scholarships, etc...).

Privatization of higher education is unfortunately not matched by creating the opportunities for individualized financing of studying under a system of low-interest (or zero-interest) loans, tax deductions or a system of deferred payments. For these reasons -taking into account a substantial lowering of the living standard- the number of university students should be expected to decline substantially, followed by growing exclusivity of higher education.

A characteristic feature of Polish higher education in the last two years has been a change in the structure of enrolment in higher schools. We have observed that young people, as if driven by the "cost effectiveness" principle, have given preference to those subjects which enhance their chances for finding well paid and challenging jobs, offering opportunities for promotion (also or perhaps primarily abroad). A particularly large growth in the number of first-year students can be seen in economics departments.
(which so far have been rather neglected), especially those offering courses in finance, banking, marketing. This does not mean, however, that interest has fallen in such popular fields as psychology, history of art, other humanities as well as English philology.

As regards teaching programmes and organization of courses there is rapid reorientation towards adopting western models. Professional courses (so-called short cycles) are introduced, and the system of student grading starts to emulate the western systems. The implementation of these -basically necessary and indispensable changes- encounters and will continue to encounter a number of barriers, the most serious of which are:

1. **Economic barrier**: very low salaries for faculty cause an outflow of many young and talented professors and enforce so-called negative selection. No small matter is the poor professional level of the support personnel (low wages): secretaries, lab assistants, research assistants and technicians, etc. .

2. **Incidence of western expertise and assistance**: many teaching programmes are being transformed according to the advice and suggestions of frequently accidental western experts. In a similar manner literature is selected and textbooks are translated, and their level leaves much to be desired. Many experts profess an amazing conviction that Polish sciences and Polish education date back to 1991 or, at best, to 1990.

3. **Staffing and age barrier**: rapid ageing of the professorial staff (and therefore reduced motivation for intellectual transformation) and an extremely slow promotion in the academic careers.

4. **Social barrier**: prejudice against intellectual elites, which are not able to lead the country out of the crisis, and thus social pressure on cutting budgetary subsidies to higher education.

Many other pitfalls facing the changing Polish higher education may be quoted. For instance, the lack of coordination of the organizational, structural or programme changes which occur in Polish higher schools, the absence of any worked-out methods for controlling teaching effectiveness (progress in learning), the lack of rational mechanisms to promote circulation of academic elites, etc... One thing is certain: Polish higher education is transforming itself despite the unfavourable circumstances, is creating a propitious intellectual climate for indispensable changes and is, on many occasions, doing it faster that could have been expected given the traditionalism of the academic community.
WARSAW UNIVERSITY IN THE PERIOD OF TRANSITION

Introduction

The university as an organization is the oldest multifaculty institution of higher education in Europe which combines scientific and educational functions and has the right to confer scientific degrees. Universities date back to the XIIth century when they were the forum for a whole spectrum of scientific activities.

The scope of the sciences taught in modern universities has become both increasingly develop and differentiated. As a result of the increasing specialization of sciences and the rising demand for professionals with higher educational training there has been a tendency towards the diversification and separation of faculties.

Throughout their 900 years of existence, universities have played an important role in the progress of science as they have been agents for institutionalizing and professionalizing scientific disciplines. At the same time, their educational functions have developed. Thus modern universitites currently seek to address the problem of how to reconcile their scientific and teaching functions while still remaining centers of research.

The tasks of contemporary Polish universities have been defined as follows:

1 - to instruct students in a given discipline and to prepare them for a professional career,
2 - to conduct scientific research or create art,
3 - to prepare students to accomplish independent scientific, didactic or artistic activities,
4 - to provide further training for people who already have professional degrees and/or job,
5 - to foster national culture and scientific progress and disseminate knowledge, and,
6 - to care for students' health and physical development.

Other duties of the universities include: educating students about human rights, patriotism, democracy and truth, and preparing them to take responsibility for the future of the nation. The 1990 Higher Education Act organizes Polish institutions of higher learning according to the principles of freedom of scientific research, freedom of artistic creativity, and freedom of teaching.
The University of Warsaw offers full academic courses which lead to a Masters degree, higher professional courses, supplementary courses which lead to a Masters degree, postgraduate courses, doctoral studies, and other specialized courses and studies. Most are full-time programs but some are also run as evening, extramural and correspondence courses. The 1990 Act entitles the university to provide open studies for students without academic credentials and to establish secondary schools.

Despite many their transformations since their inception in the Middle Ages, universities have nevertheless retained a traditional structure which divides them into faculties and gives them autonomous administration. Academic teachers, students and non-academic staff form a self-governing community which participates in university administration through elected collegiate bodies, the senate and faculty councils, and elected official, the rector and faculty deans.

Universities are organized into faculties which are headed by a Council of Faculty and a dean. A university rector is responsible for the direction and activities of the institution and for the supervision of staff and students.

Independent student government exists in Polish universities. These bodies decide how to divide university funds for student activities and purposes. The universities senate must approve student government regulations.

**Financing**

The University can obtain funds from either the state budget or the budget of communes and their regions. It can also accept donations, endowments, legacies and gifts from Polish and foreign citizens. The University is allowed to charge fees for activities including research, diagnosis, experiments, licences, teaching (except for regular, fulltime courses), and economic activity. Funds which have not been used during the academic year remain at the disposal of the institution.

The University of Warsaw is state-owned and thus receives subsidies for teaching, teachers' training and related research, school maintenance, construction investment, and individual research. Research in specific fields of study, studies conducted by university employees or teams of employees, and other special tasks are also supported by the state.
The University is free to allocate the money it receives as it wishes. Institutions of higher education pay taxes only on their economic activity; these institutions must carry out their financial policy according to the financial-material plan adopted by their senates. The structure of university expenditures has not changed much in the last few years and differences lie mainly in the costs of teaching and student scholarships.

**Students, enrollment**

The University of Warsaw occupies a special place in Polish higher education because it claims the largest number of faculties, academic staff (including professors and docents), students, diplomas awarded, and volume of research undertaken. From 1985-1989, there was a systematic growth in the number of full-time students registered at the University of Warsaw (except 1986-1987) but their share of the total number of students decreased yearly by 1.6%. From 1989-1991, the proportion of full-time students has been increasing. Since 1990 students have no longer been required to be employed in order to enroll in evening and extramural courses.

A certificate of maturity is a prerequisite for the enrollment of any kind of student, degree-seeking or not, in higher education. The University of Warsaw has the most competitive admissions in all of Poland.

According to the 1990 act, an institution’s senate, acting on the recommendation of its Council of Faculty, can determine the rules for admission to the institution as well as the content of the entrance examination. Detailed policies for the admission of the winners and national finalists of subject olympiads are determined by the Minister of National Education and are binding for at least three years.

The University of Warsaw’s admission policies have become more liberal. However, significant differences exist between faculties. For several years, applicants who passed the entrance examination but were not admitted to the university due to a lack of available places have been able to join University Student Working Teams. These students thus work for the university while attending classes for non-degree seeking students. After one year, these students can be admitted to the regular programmes if there are vacancies.

As a consequence of changes in the Polish economy which have made it increasingly for secondary school graduates to find jobs, full-time university students in 1989-1990 were younger than their counterparts in 1985-1986.
Many of the older and financially less well-off students who had families to support dropped out of universities to seek employment. Some of these older students chose to continue as part-time students; however many private enterprises do not care very much whether an employee does not have a diploma of higher education. During the six years from 1985-1991, the largest number of students chose to study Humanities, Economics and Social Sciences followed by Natural Sciences and Law and Administration. Fields of study with smaller numbers of first-year students can be divided into two groups: those with strong dynamics of growth and those with declining enrollments. The first group includes Mathematics and Computer Sciences and Management; the second group encompasses the field of Education Science.

Students expressed constant preferences for the study of Law and Administration, Management, Polish Philology (with Lithuanian Philology), History, and Pedagogy. The numbers of students in Psychology, Chemistry, Political Science, Computer Science, Economics, Sociology, Mathematics, Philosophy, and Social Prevention and Resocialization increased during this period while the number of students in Pre-school Education, Social Work Studies (which are only part-time programs), Teacher Training, and Journalism decreased. A more or less constant number of students have chosen to study foreign languages at the University of Warsaw which has not helped to ease the growing demand for foreign language teachers in Polish schools.

New patterns of University

The University and its faculties have become more autonomous and are now free to choose their own methods of recruitment, admissions policies, curricula, and methods of instruction. The completion of this process may be rather slow, however, as there are not sufficient funds to purchase the books and materials or to employ the academic teachers necessary for true reform.

Under the new legislation, the University may charge fees for all forms of study except for regular full-time courses. The University may be tempted to commercialize its teaching and abandon its universal principles due to the financial restrictions it faces during these economically difficult times. This free market approach to education may seriously limit realization of the University's mission. Many postgraduate programs are already financed by students or the enterprises which employ them. In the near
future, all types of studies for working people will probably be financed this way.

Efforts are being made to give students more flexibility and options in choosing their courses. Reformers hope that the first two years of study will thus be quite general while the senior years could support more specialization. A new trend in full-time study appears to provide short-cycles of studies which, following Western models, are more professionally oriented and last from 3 to 3.5 years.

There will be profound reform in financial and social aid to students. Institutions have increasingly begun to charge students for their instruction. In this case, the state would only help students obtain low interest loans or provide scholarships. Because the right to a free education is deeply cherished by Polish people, these new financial arrangements may cause interest in pursuing higher education to decline while widespread social disapproval augments.

Academic teachers, including those at the University of Warsaw, have been ageing. The low salaries of academic employees and new, increasingly materialist values among the youth, seem to indicate that the University will have difficulty in acquiring "new blood". At the same time, many academic teachers have been required to take on supplementary jobs in order to maintain their standard of living, which leaves them less time for academics and therefore may adversely affect their work at the University. A large number of students also spend more time working as a time to accumulate funds for the first few years after graduation.