

The Public Good and the Common Good in Public Higher Education in Poland.

Framework

Much attention has been given in higher education research to disruptive influence of ongoing marketisation that undermines the publicness of public university (Newfield 2010), as well as to the blurring of the boundaries between public and private that happened in consequences of these processes (Guzmán-Valenzuela 2016; Macfarlane 2015). Relatively fewer studies dealt with a culturally differentiated mode of understanding of what emerged in response to the material undermining of the idea of the public university. Recently, we can observe the growth of the discussions and the presentations of the idea of higher education as the common good (UNESCO 2015, Marginson 2016, Locatelli 2018). Many efforts have been made to operationalise the concept for the analysis of its development (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova 2018), as well as for the investigation of the perceptions of main actors within a national system (Tian & Liu 2018). However, the concepts of the public good and the common good have no clear boundaries and are often used interchangeably. This paper continues and expands this line of inquiry by sharpening the conceptual distinction and grounding it in a specific empirical context of Polish higher education system.

On the one side, the public good is usually seen as the normative ideal towards which the practice within the particular national sector should be oriented. On the other side, the common good can be understood in terms of broader social solidarity and social relations and places the university in the centre of stimulation of tolerance, social cohesion, urban life formation, promotion of cosmopolitan identity, mobility and global cooperation. This paper presents and uses this conceptual pair as a prism through which one can look at the recent developments within the Polish higher education.

The case of Poland

To better understand the tension between the public and the common good as seen through the eyes of the actors of the Polish higher education system, they should be read against the background of its recent history, which first and foremost is the history of the rapid universalisation of access (Kwiek & Szadkowski 2018). This process was accompanied by at least three important developments that shaped the current condition of the sector.

First, the uncontrolled and market-driven expansion of the sector (Kwiek 2013) led to the imbalanced development of the academic disciplines. Humanities and social sciences turned towards a teaching-oriented mode of generation of revenues and in consequence, deinstitutionalised their research capacities (Kwiek 2012). However, a recent reversed demographic trend, which traversed the sector, contributed to its' deprivatization, a hasty process of depleting the public institutions of private, fee-based sources of revenues combined with gradual disappearance of the demand-driven private sector (Kwiek 2017).

Second, during the expansion period, the higher education sector where generally left on its own (Kwiek 2014) and the academic community gained a substantial level of autonomy. This resulted in Poland becoming one of the most collegial national systems in Europe (Kwiek 2015). Moreover, it forms a background of the strong conviction present along the sector about the necessity of the maintaining strong independence of higher education institutions and their inner life from the control (even at a distance) of the state.

Third, as a response, the recent reforms (Kudrycka's reforms from 2008-2012 and more recently, so-called Law 2.0 prepared and consulted between 2016 and 2018) aimed at re-engagement of the state as an active actor within the higher education system that tries to reshape it in line with a more instrumental view. This effort created a tension between the demands for public accountability and the academic independence (Shaw 2018) that is reflected in the different conceptions of higher education as the public and as the common good discussed by the interviewees in this study.

Methods & Methodology

The paper is based on a national case study prepared for an international comparative project that encompasses seven other national cases. The focus of this particular is on Polish higher education system and the two exemplary public universities – one metropolitan and research-oriented, second smaller and embedded in the socio-economic life of its' region.

The study uses the qualitative method of inquiry, and it is based on 36 semi-structured interviews conducted with the representatives of Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education and national collegial governing bodies, as well as with the leadership of the two studied universities and the academic faculty in three disciplines: history, economics and engineering.

At this stage, part of the interviews has been transcribed and coded in vivo to identify common themes that would require further investigation (Charmaz 2014). Initial nodes of analysis have been formed and investigated in the light of the existing literature.

Initial findings

The access to higher education in Poland is still recognised as the public good, as well as a medium through which universities contribute to the formation of the common good (at regional and global levels). Recognition of the destructive force of market-driven massification has brought distrust towards the positive role of private provision. This has been clearly expressed with open opposition to the idea of introduction of universal fees, which were marginalised in both, the current wave of debates around the reform of the system and within interviews material analysed.

At the organisational level, the idea of the public university as an institution contributing to the national public good has been opposed to the idea of the academic discipline (institutionalised at the department level) that contributes to the regional or global common good. This opposition has to be seen in the context of the conflict between the state control and the collegial power that takes place within the Polish system.

The initial research results go in line with the idea of the bipolar continuum between the public and the common good (Locatelli 2018). In the view of the interviewees, the relational and communal aspects of the contribution of higher education can be based only on the strong support of the state.

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