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UNIVERSUM, LOGOS AND RES SPECIES

The paper presents a discussion on the fundamental problems of higher education institutions in Poland after 1990. The author points the main features of changes, but his concern is on threats to university education. Most of these threats come from commercialization and standardization of higher education.

Keywords: higher education, Bologna process.

Higher education in Europe and in Poland has been suffering dramatic changes lately. The globalization, technology, and expanding markets generate brand new and very difficult challenges for universities. Those challenges generally can be formulated as requirements for graduates who should be equipped in practical and specialized knowledge, and also they should be inventive, creative and mobile. At the beginning of the 1990s, the Polish higher education faced an existential problem: either universities should educate in direct response to ever-changing market demand, or they should deliver the fundamental knowledge and stimulate the skills to independently solve practical problems, and to form students' attitudes. Such discussions were held among the members of the Central Council of Higher Education, and the opinion of Prof. H. Samsonowicz prevailed that higher education should be universal and independent from current and volatile market's needs. The idea prevailed that higher education should be academic, and universities should preserve their traditional autonomy. Hence, higher education for the sake of the future is to deliver the state-of-the-art knowledge in a given field. Further, it meant that the development of scientific research at the universities (Barczak, 2006, pp. 99-103) is based on Plato school, Aristotelian epistemology, and on assuming the current scientific paradigms (in specific fields of science, and as a foundation of scientific methodology, i.e., formulating hypotheses and their evaluation).

Notwithstanding the constitutional independence of universities in Poland, (this is also the case in the EU countries, however, it is defined differently) the influence of the state (and of the European Union) on higher

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education institutions has been growing. Not only the labels of fields of study are formulated by the central administration, but also the programme minima, thus reducing significantly the independence of universities. The financing of higher education is also involved. The amount of detailed regulations binding for Poland's universities is overwhelming. The recent problems connected with the new criteria of the categorization of faculties and fields of study (with important financial consequences) as well as the official review of higher education quality by the state's organs precisely unify and standardize higher education. Thus, universities are being deprived of their ancient mission and no longer fulfil their basic role – of being a *universum*. Prof. Barbara Skarga has recently said that: "there is no university without enthusiasm, without a community of diverse disciplines, or freedom of thought. There is no true science either" (Skarga, 2007). A university is a collection of persons active in diverse scientific fields, seeking scientific values and the highest values such as truth, goodness and beauty, when all at the university are equal (although some are more talented than others). Scientific research will always be carried out at the universities (although it is believed that the most important scientific achievements have been recently made in specialized research institutes which are commercial in nature) (Skarga, 2007). However, freedom of thought, or the inalienable right of universities, is jeopardized. Major contributions are made not only by the standardization of lectures and their contents (along with the red tape of the so-called syllabi), but also by the idiosyncratic conformism of scholars eager to obtain funding. The serious team research programs are slowly shifting from universities to commercial institutes, whereas the teaching process is being unified both in content and in form.

Universities become enterprises "producing" French fries of arguable freshness. In Poland, we also deal with a considerable degree of higher education commercialization, not only at private but also at public universities. (The fees for extramural studies in public institutions are applied based on market criteria, as are the fees for additional examinations.) This process resulted in the consequences of Kopernik-Gresham's Law, and weak universities drive good universities out of the market. (This can be seen at technical faculties and those requiring serious mathematical background.) Despite earnest and focused efforts by the administration, the average quality of a graduate's level in Poland decreases following the proliferation of many private specialized institutions. The improvement of the scholarization index does not give a good reason for contentment because it is not accompanied by progress in general public education. (The

classical evidence are results of surveys showing that at some universities in the U. S. the level of illiteracy among students is significant.) The transformations of universities following their shutdowns or slow declining of the so-called *universum* at the university, generate plain commercialized institutes teaching specialists according to the current needs of the market. New technologies resulted in new trends of higher education – e-education. Remote education apparently contradicts the idea of university, but it complies with the market's requirements. A diploma has become a commodity, but administrative regulations of the education market are often ineffective, because they are unable to produce the genuine university. It is not possible to administratively induce enthusiasm and fascination with the world. This can only happen at university.

Later on, the so-called Bologna strategy appeared, adjusting the European system of higher education to current market needs (even if short-lived ones). Introducing the three-cycle qualification (bachelor's degree, master's degree, doctoral degree) causes immense difficulties in the construction of rational schedules and sequences of courses, results in redundancies of contents taught, and in the so-called battle for teaching hours assigned to specific teachers (departments). Most frequently, fundamental courses teaching the basics on which more detailed knowledge can be built are cancelled and replaced with lectures which are exiguous and get obsolete fast. The emergence of such artificial specialities in response to challenges by labour markets does not result from the needs of practice and life, but from the preferences of particular communities and individuals. Thus, the Bologna strategy extends the duration of studies, and after the three cycles of education a graduate enters the labour market at the age of almost 35 years.

The research of demand and supply in the labour market allows to identify the decreasing or increasing demand for specific occupations. The control of this process is very difficult not only because of inadequate knowledge about the demand for labour (and its high volatility over time), but also because of the inertia in the education system generating the supply (Barczak, Tausz, 2004). The administrative creation of the process aiming at the transformation of society into an information society or knowledge-based society is nothing more than a political manoeuvre without any rational foundations (a term 'knowledge-based economy' is both misleading and false).

The reflection is extremely urgent, aimed at the redefinition of *universum* for a university, and at its implementation, so that higher education graduates

not only comprehend the contemporary world, but also are able to change it using their knowledge and attitudes.

The understanding of the essence of science – *logos* – has come a long way. The progress of science and building civilizations have been accomplished by the changes of scientific paradigms (Barczak, Smoluk, 1992; Barczak, 1991). This can only happen at university. And there is no higher level teaching without research carried out at the university. This truism should be remembered at all times, most definitely. We should defend universities against commercialization which destroys the ethos of university, of scholars, and consequently, also of university graduates.

The narrow specialities required by the labour market should be reached not at university, but in the course of current training courses carried out by specialized firms. Then, their commercial nature makes sense. However, the activities of such firms have to fulfil the market requirements (This should be the way of educating, among others, auditors, exchange traders, funds managers, actuaries, building inspectors, and all sorts of experts) and also the rules of good practices (Kotarbiński, 1965; Barczak, 1998).

When a number of narrow specialities in higher education significantly increases without due association with the basic body of knowledge, the mission of a university is modified. This is worthy to remember because solid and unchangeable fundamentals contained in canons of knowledge defined as a consensus of diverse scientific disciplines present a foundation for specialized education. Otherwise, higher level education becomes an unconvincing game of adjustments to the capricious and short-lived requirements of the labour market. Subsequently, a need for permanent education emerges, without grounds for personal development.

Seeking a compromise between the mission of a university covering both *universum* and *logos* in view of *res species* is one of the most significant challenges today facing higher education in Poland and in Europe.

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