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“Where do we go?” – the dilemmas, challenges and hopes for future career development at the university

Summary

Globalization and commercialization of higher education systems and social acceleration causes the changes in an academic career. Some policymakers and scholars perceive the neoliberal transformation and commercialization of higher education as a necessity and advantage, while the others, especially from the humanities and social sciences, recognize them as disruptions of a traditional university system. I would like to make an attempt to reconstruct the discussion of the Western scholars on neoliberal changes in academia. Moreover, I will point out the main dilemmas and controversies which occurred in the professional practice of scholars that include: the balance and disproportions between teaching and research; ‘publish or perish’ syndrome, specialization and fragmentation of knowledge and science; maintaining quality and dealing with *bureaucracy* in higher education system.

Key words: academic career, university, neoliberal approach, consumerism.

A German scholar Hartmut Rosa teaches us that speed became the heart of contemporary life and experience of modernisation is now equal to the experience of acceleration. He suggests that we live in the times of technical, social and pace of life acceleration, but at the same time we feel scarcity of time (Rosa 2013). Social acceleration caused new phenomena, nothing in this world has lasting effect, everything rather must be “temporally reconstructed”. Thus, as Rosa writes “in the functionally differentiated society of high modernity, a linear time consciousness with an open future predominates historical development is no longer understood as running toward a determinate goal, and its ending remains uncertain” (Rosa 2013: 6). Thus, from this perspective any scenario for

the higher education development cannot survive the next day. Everything is in a state of flux, so the future of academic careers seems to be uncertain. The managerial culture and neoliberal transformation in higher education pose the new questions about academic career development.

We may observe that the contemporary discussion reveals similar patterns about tendencies in the academic career development (e.g. Australia, the US, the UK, the Netherlands, etc). For example, the last transformation of academic promotion in Poland, expressed in the Act on Scientific Degrees and titles from 18 of March 2011, has changed the procedure of academic career. This transformation is tightly correlated with neoliberal approach, market and consumer orientation in higher education, as well as the need of acceleration of academic careers. Stanisław Waltoś clearly explains that the changes are the compromise between two standpoints, one which supports the acceleration of academic staff development, and another one which favours the old system (Waltoś 2012: 31). The neoliberal changes and ideas have been spreading around the world at universities, bringing the promise that they will be more effective, productive and competitive. Commercialisation of higher education forces the universities to offer not (only) knowledge and ideas but products. Universities are no longer a haven of wisdom, discovery and discussion, but they are becoming factories of diplomas and research outputs (see: Land & Gordon 2013; Gosling 2013; Molesworth et al. 2009; Singleton-Jackson et al. 2010).

Thus, universities are regarded as enterprises which should operate according to economic rules. The language of economy is being used to describe social functions of the academia more and more often. David L. Kirp writes: "in this brave new world each academic unit is a 'revenue center', each party a 'stakeholder', each student a customer, each professor an entrepreneur, and each institution a seeker for profit whether in money or intellectual capital" (Kirp 2005: 114). This new vocabulary and these practices in higher education are criticised by scholars, especially from the humanities. Some observe that economic approach is troublesome, because universities are struggling to maintain balance between market orientation and tradition. As a result "this difficulty can lead to uncertainty in the institution's mission and values, and can have a turbulent and occasionally destabilizing effect on planning of courses and organization of departments" (Land & Gordon 2013: 269).

The patterns of academic careers also have changed. Scholars are expected to be productive, effective and competitive in order to make the universities more visible and attractive on the global market. Of course higher education must react to the changes and adapt to them, otherwise the universities will only

be museums of knowledge. We need to also remember that universities never have been entirely autonomous. In the past they were strongly connected with the church, monarchies, nation state, and today with the private business. Universities should adapt to changes, but first of all the role of the universities is to change the world. Especially when our times are not certain and we live in the risk society, as Ulrich Beck suggested. Universities, as Roland Barnett states, should help people to manage to live with uncertainty and supercomplexity (Barnett 2000). However, a British scholar Frank Furedi criticises the market forces in the higher education system, states “the market neither stimulates efficiency nor provides an incentive for creativity. It merely offers a short-term, quick-fix approach to intellectual life” (Furedi 2002: 36). The external agencies, including government, expect from the universities to be more competitive, thus scholars are told to publish more in shorter time, to create lists of their achievements, to fill in bureaucratic requirements and to give excellence lectures in order to make students happy and keep them in the system.

Hence the question, where do we go? The international literature review shows us some paths which the contemporary scholars must follow. In this paper I will try to reconstruct the debate about the current problems, dilemmas and controversies of the academic path in the light of neoliberal changes and consumer-orientation.

First path: publish or perish

The “publish or perish” slogan became widely used over thirty years ago in the United States. Scholars are promoted and evaluated on their research performance, thus the slogan “publish or perish” has become an ideology at the contemporary universities. In this new brave world of neoliberal ideology at universities, the process of research, discovery, producing knowledge and ideas are becoming instrumental. Thus, Frank Furedi asks “do academics still think?”. His answer is “yes, we do”, but “thinking has become freelance activity to be pursued when we are not teaching, administrating or researching” (Furedi 2007: 4). The audit culture, rankings, external pressure on outputs bred the new approach towards an intellectual life. Some papers are written “at midnight on the Saturday night” (Moon, Saltmarsh, Sutherland-Smith 2013: 60). Thus, the work performance of the scholars is a never-ending story; they do not know when they are at work and when at home. Thus, the Australian scholars write

“the notion that research is a ‘hobby’ is one of the necessary fictions both research managers and academic staff tell themselves so that the production of work outside normal university hours is not understood as the excess of labour that it is” (Ibidem). They also notice that early career researchers interviewed in their study admitted that “a 24/7 academic lifestyle was required for success in academia” (Ibidem). It seems that this pattern has a lot in common with the patterns existing in corporations. Perhaps, some may regard universities as corporations, but the final effects of their performance are different.

The neoliberal changes led to new phenomena in higher education. For example in Great Britain, as Furedi notices “bureaucratic pressure mediated through the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) forces academics to produce a certain number of publications by a particular date” (Furedi 2002: 40). Thus, the emphasis is on quantity rather on content. The same remarks are given by Lawrence M. Mead, who states that it is more important “how many” an academic has published rather “what” (Mead 2011: 304). There is no doubt that contemporary universities are obsessed with metrics. The followers on the “publish or perish” path are aware that the impact factors, the number of citations, Hirsh index and any other metric are the core of academic performance to indicate whether a scholar is efficient and productive or not. Andrew Whelan suggests that “competition implies metrics, as metrics are the means by which system outputs can be ranked. The higher score, the more excellent they are (...) Quality of course, is measured through quantification” (Whelan 2013: 22). This approach led almost all academics to the point on their path where they need to calculate “does it pay” and treat their research instrumentally. The findings of academic research will not serve knowledge dissemination or public good, but they will be treated as a tool in academic promotion. The pressure on quantity rather than on content inevitably leads to banality of academic outputs and poor research. If it is quantity that counts, then original research is in danger. Lawrence M. Mead indicates that we can observe an “*exhaustion of research*”, while all research is reproduction of existing knowledge (Mead 2011: 303). This reproduction may be explained by pressing academics into publishing more in a particular time (“as soon as possible”). Exploration of a new problem or phenomena is time-consuming, and if there is “no time” or “stolen time”, the only possibility left is to reproduce the same problem, question, topic over and over again. As a consequence the pressure on quantity rather than on content created dissatisfaction among academics (Bazeley 2010: 890). The academics may not feel as discoverers of truth but rather reproducers and duplicators of existing knowledge.

Following this path early career researchers are obliged to fulfil requirements, they need to be productive and effective but only in the manner when products of their work can be counted. The academic output must be measurable. So far this market-oriented model of higher education dominated mostly in the United States. Today, as literature review reveals, many other countries introduced the solutions of the US system (i.e. Australia, UK, the Netherlands, Poland). In the 1990s the American scholars described the “Publish or Perish Syndrome” (POPS). Publishing is the most important task of the scholars, any others activities are not equally important (Katula & Doody 1990: 94). Despite the fact that academics have more duties, including teaching, research performance and outputs (productivity) measured by numbers of publications in the high-ranked journals are the main metric in a career promotion. Therefore, many young scholars may feel the effect of POPS. According to an American study, 95% of the faculty state that publications and their numbers are the most important factor in receiving tenure. 83% admitted that the journal in which the paper is published is also an influencing factor on tenure decision. Only 10% perceive that student evaluation is important for receiving tenure (Backes-Gellner & Schlinghoff 2010: 31). Similar conclusions are drawn from Pat Bazeley’s study, “the pressure to publish (linked with publication as an outcome), not surprisingly, dominates researchers’ thinking about research performance” (Bazeley 2011: 893).

Moreover, an individual approach towards the academic staff has been fading away since the managerial and market orientation in higher education appeared. As a consequence everyone is evaluated on the same metrics (the same patterns), without individual approach (Katula & Doody 1990: 75). It is worth noticing then, that individual assessment destroys collegial nature of scholarship. Thus, there is a new category of scholars which may be described as “selfish”, who embody “a sort of contagion that disregards collegiality and the value of research beyond an individual academic’s interests, and further reinforces the asymmetries of academic labour” (Randell-Moon et al. 2013: 62). From this perspective neo-liberal philosophy encourages scholars to think about themselves as individuals “who calculate about themselves”, “add values” to themselves, improve their productivity and live in constant calculation (Ibidem: 63).

It is also worth noticing then that the POPS may even increase in intensity when publications are already sent to the publishers and they are expected to be issued. The process of research problem conceptualization, conducting research, analysing data, writing a paper (especially in the social sciences and the humanities) takes time. The process of publishing also. However, the academics are expected to produce the papers like hamburgers in McDonald’s. We can

observe a paradox, which intensifies POPS: the scholars are expected to be productive in particular time, but time of 'product' delivery is beyond their scope. There is also data which suggests that scholars from the humanities, social sciences, education and arts publish less than their counterparts from science or engineering (see: Santo et al. 2009; Bazeley 2011). One possible explanation according to Steven Sack, is shorter papers and more authors in science (Stack 2004: 903). Pat Bazeley suggests that the scholars who prefer or have to publish a book rather than a paper in a journal are disadvantaged (Bazeley 2011: 890).

As a consequence the large books, completing of which takes more time than a paper, will be replaced (or will completely disappear) by short papers published in different journals, numbers of which are mushrooming every year due to specialization. Again, L. M. Mead points out that the contemporary research is specialised, thus many professional journals are created. There is also specialization of conferences, so Mead suggests that "specialists are talking entirely among themselves" (Mead 2010: 406) and "scientists today have far narrower interests than they did thirty years ago" (Mead 2011: 301).

In these circumstances it is better ("it pays") to publish a paper in a professional and high-ranked journal, which is read by a couple of people (professionals) than to write a book (bestseller) which could be explored by many people. Again, it is worth emphasizing that publications are not viewed as the subject of knowledge dissemination, but they may be treated instrumentally as a tool in career promotion. It should not be surprising, then, that the number of publications decreases after getting tenure in the United States (Mead 2011). Today it is not important what we have done already, but how many we have done, actually. Our publications, reports, books, thoughts do not serve for knowledge dissemination or public good, but for our own purpose – to have a certain number of publications in order to be promoted and not to perish. If we live in the times of social acceleration, where time flies faster and faster, there is no doubt that slowing down, may take effect in ending one's career. In other words "the time standing still becomes pathological" (Rosa 2013: 16), thus those who are not able to "keep up" must be prepared to be treated as disadvantaged.

Second path: make student happy

The tension between teaching and research has always been a problem for scholars (Brickhead 2007). The Humboldtian idea of university perceives teaching and research as inseparable. Today, scholars are promoted on the basis

of academic performance. Thus, these two functions of the university teaching and research will predictably be separated, although many scholars criticise this approach. Young academics especially from the social sciences and the humanities struggle to find the balance between teaching students and conducting research. Teaching students is one of the university functions, but if we take the idea of consumerism and commercialization into the consideration, we would observe a tendency to make students happy rather to educate them. Our lectures should be interesting and, as George Ritzer states: spectacular. He also compares universities to “cathedral of consumption”, pointing out that “today’s universities cannot simply McDonaldise – they must also utilise spectacles to make themselves seem enchanted to their consumer base” (Ritzer 2002: 20). From this point of view courses delivered by contemporary universities, according to the logic of consumer society, must be interesting and useful. Namely, they need to bring the promise that after completing a particular course, students will be equipped with the skills which are useful on the job market.

The academic teachers are supposed to be “showmen” doing everything not to bore students. Thus, they need to stimulate students all the time, not necessarily intellectually, to make them happy. We may observe the struggle to maintain students attention and awake an interest in the classes (see: Land, Gordon 2013). Dennis Hayes ironically states that “a preoccupation with evaluations keeps university lecturers away from research activities while they collate and respond to these evaluations and then spend time brushing up on their jokes and PowerPoint skills” (Hayes 2002: 147). We need to remember that in the Western universities evaluation by students is an important factor in promotion. Thus, some scholars observe that students are given good grades in order to give good notes in their evaluation sheet of an academic. We may observe then some kind of tying agreement: students receive good notes and academic lecturers expect satisfying evaluations. Thus, some scholars remark that these phenomena cause ‘grade inflation’ (Kezim et al. 2005: 59; see also Potts 2005).

Mary Evans points out that “students may rate more highly teachers who demonstrate the ‘customer-service-traits’ they expect, such as friendliness, concern, sensitivity, understanding, and support” (Evans 2002: 170). There is nothing wrong to be kind towards students, contrary, university lectures should treat students with respect, giving them support and understanding. However, this is not the main duty of academic teachers. They need to stimulate thinking, pose difficult questions and demand that students actually study. Otherwise, if we stop demanding then the planes will fall down, patients will be dying and

school children will never learn to read. We cannot only treat students as consumers, because they are not consumers as their main duty is to study. They are not only consumers because they are also producers. Following this path we may try to make students happy, but we cannot forget that making them happy means also making them more informed and critical. Otherwise as Harry R. Lewis writes "today's consumer culture, in which college's job is to make its students happy rather than to educate them, threatens the old idea that the disciplinary system should make people into better people" (Lewis 2006: 161).

The other issue needed to be considered in relation to student satisfaction is university tuition. In the United States and in the United Kingdom, too, students pay for their university education. As a consequence students and their parents feel they are customers and often they are demanding. Michel Potts recalls a situation that has happened to him, when one student told him "I'm paying for school, so I should be given an 'A,' even if I don't study." Potts explains "that student was not kidding, and his attitude is similar to the attitude of many students who think of education as a product to be bought like an item on a store shelf" (Potts 2005: 54). The similar conclusions are drawn from the study of Jill A. Singleton-Jackson, Dennis L. Jackson and Jeff Reinhardt "while our participants agreed that attending class and reading are their responsibilities as students, they expressed feelings that attending and reading should result in credit or passing, regardless of performance. (...) Our participants expressed beliefs that just showing up is an achievement worthy of reward in itself" (Singleton-Jackson et al. 2010: 351). The student reaction show that their perception of university education is oversimplified.

However, we need to look at this issue from the other side too. Scholars tend to criticise students' behaviour when they think that they are consumers. But we need to remember that universities – probably around the world – send a message to students and their parents, that they are consumers, in fact. We may observe some kind of asymmetry: students had to prove their abilities to study at the university in the past, today, universities must prove that they deserve to be chosen by students (see: Parker 2002; Lewis 2006). As a consequence universities give a wide range of offers that have nothing in common with research or teaching. In order to attract student-consumer attention they offer not only teaching materials, but also computers, memory sticks, mugs or other gifts. Universities make a lot effort to prepare marketing strategies, they hire professionals PR officers. The university leaflets are full of colours and the main information that can be found by potential students-consumers is what kind of job they will get after graduation. (see: Molesworth et al. 2009; Land

& Gordon 2013). Universities send a clear message: we will not teach you, we will not make you a critical thinker, we will not help you to understand the world through research process, but we will give you a credential that you can exchange on the job market. The missions of universities are full of economic language and all activities are subject to the economic rules (see: Arthur 2005: 17). This is how neoliberal, entrepreneurial universities work.

We need to also remember that universities must react to the changes and challenges of the world, otherwise, they become the “museum of knowledge” only. There always have been tensions between proponents of transformation and supporters of the old order. Nowadays we can also observe the tension between those who are in favour of neoliberal, market-oriented and the traditional approach at universities. We can also find a third path, which would be a consensus between these two approaches. Phill Clegg suggests that academics demonstrate resistance towards neoliberal philosophy in higher education. Moreover he maintains, that according to some authors, this philosophy is in crisis now. Thus, he appeals “one might postulate the possibility of an alliance, or even of many alliances with others affected by the crisis, both within and outside the university. There are also other means of resistance than occupation. Among the less confrontative methods are debate, critical scholarship and persuasion” (Clegg 2008: 224). There is still a room for development of creative and critical thinking among students, even in the age of modularisation and standardisation. We, as the actors of academic life, have the influence on how this scene will be performed. We need to bear in our minds that changes are necessary, we need to reason and understand them, but at the same time we are the creators of our relationships with students.

Third path: make lists

The third path leads to bureaucratisation. The modularisation of teaching, keeping the standards and quality demands filling in numerous documents from scholars. University life teaches us how to live in the culture of audit and we are being trained to make lists: lists of publications, grants, conferences, personal achievements etc. We are obliged to do syllabuses, specify the learning outcomes, fill in different charts in order to meet the demands of external, auditing bodies. Our government starts to perceive the academia as an industry, believing that there is no difference in running a company and a university. There is an assumption that standards improve the quality of academic performance.

The more tables, lists we make, the better. Anyway, do syllabuses or learning outcomes really improve our performance? Contrary, list making allows to evaluate whether academics are able to "follow instructions" rather than to perform "creative thinking" (Furedi 2007: 4).

Moreover the managerial approach, audit culture and bureaucratisation changed the attitudes towards the academics. First, they are not trusted anymore as individuals who are able to construct they own culture. Secondly, they lost their rights to defining university's purposes, because many other external agencies are responsible for shaping the future of higher education. Ideas of how university should or shouldn't work are not products of academic thinking. Furedi states that it is not wrong to have divergent opinion about higher education, but nowadays "instead of reflection or informed debate what we have are decrees dreamt up by invisible bureaucrats and officials" (Ibidem: 8). Thus, Tim Brikhead appeals: "a less bureaucratic system would provide more time for teaching, research and scholarship" (Brickhead 2007: 27).

The contemporary universities adopted the audit culture and scholars are socialised to live with it. The internal motivation of academic inquiry and giving good lectures is not taken into account, contrary there is a belief that only external pressure would motivate scholars. There is nothing wrong to motivate workers of any institution, organization or company. Unfortunately, some of these introduced incentives have nothing in common with academic performance but rather with business efficiency focused on profit maximization only. The motivation, especially in scholarship, should be internal. Scholars should be passionate with their inquiries. Probably, if they lack internal motivation to conduct research and to share with their discoveries with students and wide society, the external motivation would not help. Moreover, it is easier to internalise the values that the particular team worked out together rather than the imposed values.

As a consequence academics are forced to carry out „endless round of meaningless paperwork in order to meet the demands of different auditing agencies. Academics are compelled to adopt practices that are consistent with the demands of bureaucratic institutions that audit their teaching and research, regardless of what they believe is in the best interest of their students or of university life, and, sadly, these externally imposed demands have encouraged practices that lead to formulaic teaching and superficial research" (Furedi 2002: 34).

Fourth path: go to the therapy

In these new circumstances the scholars are losing self-esteem and feel uncertain about their roles in higher education. On the one hand they are forced to be productive and effective in the academic performance. They are expected to be excellent researchers and grant receivers in order to improve the records of university. On the other hand, they are also expected to be excellent teachers or even more, excellent salesmen of educational products. They are aware that students are (almost) always right and must be satisfied. They are aware that paperwork is something that must be done, even if they know that this is not work itself actually. Some of them may feel frustrated, some of them might ask where the knowledge, ideas, collaboration, open discussion with students and peers are. They may also feel anxiety of time pressure and the risk of not “keeping up”. In the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and probably in other countries, too, tertiary teaching is provided by sessional and short-term contracted staff. This may be taken as an evidence of “the deprofessionalisation and proletarianisation’ of higher education across all European countries” (Whelan et al. 2013: 4).

It is worth noting then, that “there is no scholarship without passion”, as Rowan Wilken and Christian McCrea suggest. However, they also point out that “while one might experience ‘passionate enthusiasm’ for academic work, one might equally experience this same work as ‘passion of uncertainty and anxiety’” (Wilken, McCrea 2013: 43). The similar standpoint is expressed by Rowena Harper who states that the previous changes brought about a sense of “ontological insecurity”, that it is to say “a profound uncertainty about ways of being in the university” (Harper 2013: 35). Dennis Hayes seems to be more radical when he diagnoses that “academics lost their visions or their hope, they became ripe for therapy” (Hayes 2002: 152).

It is not an optimistic vision for the contemporary academics. The aforementioned examples confirm the famous message of Bill Readings from the beginning of the 90’s that universities are in ruins. Do the paths of academic career lead through ruins? There are many voices that condemn the neoliberal philosophy in higher education. Despite the audit culture, managerial approach, orientation on profits, maximizing productivity and efficiency of academic outputs, we need to bear in mind that first and foremost the process of education and research at the universities still depends on the academics because it is they who create the learning and scholarship environment.

Some say, as I tried to show above, that critical thinking and tutoring were killed by modularisation and standardisation. However, Alan Hudson refutes the myth of critical thinking and relationship between tutor and student that allegedly were present in the past. Thus, the conservative orientation in academia makes nostalgic policies and creates myths about universities in the past. Maybe we should accept that the contemporary changes – neoliberal orientation and consumerism – are the next step in the higher education evolution. The history of university development teaches us that it has been always reducing the tensions through negotiations between those who were in favour of changes and those who were against. A critique of university is necessary to transform it. We need to remember that in the times of social acceleration nothing is certain, as Rosa writes “everything is constantly in flux, and the future is therefore completely open and uncertain and no longer simply derivable from the past and the present” (Rosa 2013: 14).

Today we can distinguish three possible approaches to the changes in the academia. The first, a conservative-passive approach, which rejects neoliberal, market- and consumer-oriented culture, glorifying the past, creating policy of nostalgia and myths. The second, a progressive one which is oriented on market and consumer culture, treating the neoliberal changes as necessity. The last approach may be described as negotiating. This reaction supports changes but at the same time is open to discussion and negotiate between different contradictory approaches in order to build the consensus. This approach emphasises the need of building strategies which enable to cope with new challenges, opportunities and threats. The future of higher education depends on everyone who acts on the scene of academic life. We need to present that our job is not only to do records which enable us to get on top of the rankings or any other governmental lists. Our job is mission, we are not “doing doctorate”, “habilitacja” or “tenure”, we do not only transfer the information to students. We are responsible for teaching them and learning with them. We are responsible for creating open minded, critically thinking citizens. We should demonstrate our performance both in teaching and researching that we do not need excessive bureaucracy embodied in written standards, instructions and external agencies. If we believe that academics are still thinkers, responsible for their job, we need to defend the university against ideas that have nothing in common with the university life. Negotiating, to reduce tensions between market and economic demands and surviving of intellectual ethos. This is the task of today’s scholars and the path that we should follow.

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