

Higher education in Ukraine: current problems and probable social consequences of its reforming in the context of neoliberal transformation

Abstract

The paper brings to the forefront experts' assessments of the reforms in Ukraine's higher education system in accordance with Western neoliberal standards. The following ideas have been discussed: though higher education reform is expected to bring more autonomy to universities, promote flexibility in designing curricula and thus to improve opportunities for social, including academic mobility, its implementation will entail rising costs of higher education, restriction of access to high-quality education, aggravation of social inequality, reduction of teaching staff and further growth in unemployment. Moreover, social and cultural mission of the today's university as a producer of general social benefits may be levelled since the university will have to turn into an articulator of private business and big corporations' interests.

Keywords: *Bologna process, neoliberalism, social mission of the university*

Sociological reflections on problems and social consequences of higher education reforms are assuming great importance due to profound social, economic, political and cultural changes caused by intensifying global competition and mobility, market integration and breakthrough in the sphere of information technology. Today, Ukrainian universities are being faced with the task of integrating into the global and, particularly, European educational space as an equal participant and partner. To achieve these goals the new benchmarks are being set in the field of educational standards, which are becoming increasingly international. The educational sector is one of the most problematic now as it suffers from a deep crisis caused by difficult economic situation, on the one hand, and lack of system-

atic approach to solving problems in this area, on the other hand. That is why transition of Ukraine's higher education system to the Bologna standards is extremely painful and contradictory. Constant changes in the vector of education reforms have an adverse effect on the quality of knowledge possessed by school and university graduates.

The given paper is aimed at identifying current social problems of Ukraine's higher education system and possible risks of its reforming with a focus on Western neoliberal standards. Special attention is drawn to the results of two focus groups where the experts from three European countries (Germany, Georgia and Bulgaria) participated, discussing some outcomes of education reforms in Germany, USA, Georgia and Venezuela.

Alternative approaches to further development of higher education system have not been elaborated in Ukrainian scientific discourse so far. A detailed analysis of risks associated with education reforms according to Western neoliberal standards has not been made either. Therefore, it would be advisable to take into account the expert opinions regarding the experience of education reforms in other countries. Furthermore, this analysis would be helpful in predicting risks related to reforming national higher education system with a focus on Western neoliberal standards as well as in elaborating and discussing alternative approaches to its further development.

The empirical part of the paper (expert assessments) consists in summaries of the two expert discussions. One of them was organised by the NTUU "KPI" Sociology Department and held on September 7, 2015, at the conference hall of the Kyiv Polytechnic Institute Academic Council. Another one (the round table conference "The first year of the education reform: outcomes, threats, and development models") took place on September 8, 2015, at the UNIAN, a Kyiv-based Ukrainian independent news agency. In addition, the author refers to a number of analytical essays published in the journal "Spil'ne" ("The Common") and interviews with foreign experts concerning issues and problems in higher education.

The recent trend towards reducing public education expenditures is a prominent feature of contemporary public policy in the majority of countries, even those which traditionally considered as the most socially oriented [Pritchard, 2011; Sjoerd, 1999; Deem, 1994]. Therefore, higher education institutions have to boost business activity in order to adapt themselves to the present-day realities. Entrepreneurship is becoming a prior direction in the university's development.

Establishing extensive, sometimes transnational networks of university branches is a new strategy of today's higher education institutions. These measures (associated with the phenomenon of "academic capitalism") are supposed to help perform the following tasks: facilitate academic mobility of students and teaching staff, favour internationalisation of the curriculum, promote establishment of numerous academic contacts, improve the quality of higher education in order to give students competitive advantages at the global labour market, elaborate new approaches to personnel policy, involve more students and attract new investments. However, discussions of whether free market principles may or may not be used in the sphere of higher education reveal different viewpoints, especially what might be some of the social consequences of the education reform.

Government officials argue for expansion of private higher education and reaching a new level of academic freedom and institutional autonomy of higher education since these steps would stimulate development of internal intellectual resources and academic entrepreneurship, increase the number of students, favour the diversity of learning programs and teaching methods, provide opportunities for conclusion of beneficial international contracts and agreements.

However, experts' opinions on the commercialisation of higher education articulated by participants of the above-mentioned expert discussions are different due to critical evaluations of its consequences.

For example, Bulgarian sociologist Maria Ivancheva drew attention to the following unfavourable outcomes of the neoliberal education reform: cutting public expenditures on higher education, commercialisation of universities, reduction of permanent teaching and administrative staff, thus increasing their unemployment rate. At present, 70% of American and 80% of German professors work part-time, concluding flexible contracts that are mainly short-term and low-paying. Public funding for university students in USA decreased in 2007–2013 by 27%. In 2014, 40 million Americans had at least one student loan, and the total amount of student-loan debt reached 1.2 trillion dollars (that made up 6% of the U.S. national debt). Kerstin Kaiser, a political expert and deputy from the German Federal State of Brandenburg, enumerated the following tendencies specific to Germany: rise in tuition fees, which restricts access to higher education, especially for blue-collar workers' children; increasing teachers' workload, cut in government spending on higher education and reduction of teaching staff. In addition, many students have to work on a permanent basis while they study in order to cover their educational expenses, which results in insufficient quality of students' knowledge. They do not have enough time to take part in socio-political and cultural activities either because of having too many exams and other forms of knowledge control. According to Bakar Berekashvili, Professor of Political Science at Georgian American University (Tbilisi), outcomes of the education reform in Georgia (the period from 2003 to 2013 was mentioned) are almost the same: cutting public expenditures on higher education (only 10% of students can receive state-sponsored university places while 65% pay for education fully and 25% partially), increasing educational inequality, decreasing autonomy and independence of higher education institutions. Career advancement, strengthening of someone's position in academic community and chances of getting funding depend on loyalty and support for dominant ideology, promotion of "romantic nationalism", radical and liberal views.

Not only higher education institutions but also secondary schools have undergone serious changes as a result of reform. Differences both in access to secondary education for different social groups and in its quality are rather significant: quality of teaching/learning and discipline are poor in public secondary schools, while private schools provide much better education but they are expensive. Private school graduates (who, as a rule, belong to the upper class) continue their education at European or American universities and, consequently, possess high cultural and social capital.

A voucher mechanism ("money follows the student"), established in 2004 by Georgia's Ministry of Education and Science in order to make higher education for students from low-income families more accessible, is planned to be introduced in

Ukraine. This mechanism implies that government does not fund universities by allocating a certain number of state-sponsored places but grants tuition vouchers to students with the highest entry scores. So, the most successful students are exempted from paying tuition fees and can get university degree for free.

However, introduction of the education voucher scheme has had some unfavourable consequences. First, public expenditures on higher education were considerably reduced: at present, the share of public funds in the education budget does not exceed 20–25%. The total number and amount of state-funded scholarships decreased as well. Most Georgian students have to pay for their education, either fully or partially. Just about 25% of the most successful applicants receive grants covering from 30 to 100% of tuition fees (only those who earned the highest scores on university entrance exams, are entitled to full funding; they make up approximately 12% of the overall number of students). Second, the number of higher education institutions in Georgia dropped from 220 to less than 50 (17 of them are state-funded universities) owing to the fact that 1) the government stimulates competition among universities in attracting students and 2) accreditation and licensing procedures are too complicated. According to the World Values Survey data for the year 2014, 78.4% of Georgians were concerned about “not having an opportunity to give their children a good education, while only 10.7% were not concerned about it at all” [Muliavka, Serhiienko, 2015].

Some consequences of neoliberal reforms in higher education system urge scientists and scholars to discuss not only socio-economic but also cultural aspects of this problem. For instance, Jose Ortega y Gasset was one of the first to consider cultural reproduction as the main task of university since it follows from the university's mission. Being concerned about lack of culture in modern society, the philosopher talks about the epoch of atrocious barbarism we live in despite being self-confident. He thinks that there has never been so fake and deceptive existence before. The average man is afraid of being open to the real world which would demand a lot from him and therefore prefers to falsify his life by keeping integrity in a cocoon of fictitious and simplified world. That is why it is historically important that the university should perform its previous central task – to enlighten the man, integrate him into culture of his epoch, open him clearly a huge real world where he can fit his life [Ortega y Gasset, 2003: p. 48]. The US sociologist Craig Calhoun, analysing the neoliberal transformation of higher education in the USA (later taken up by the United Kingdom and other European countries), fairly insists on global revising the purpose of the university's existence owing to departure from the basic principles of education: impartiality and production of public benefit [Calhoun, 2013].

Being forced to pursue mainly pragmatic, material goals, the university will likely not be able to perform its core social mission based on a set of normative standards, such as objectivity and impartiality in cognition of physical and social reality, openness and independence in their work, critical attitude towards the “outer” world, transmission of rich cultural heritage and humanistic values, etc. In the period between mid-19th and late 20th century, universities managed to lead humanity to the extraordinary frontiers of knowledge and creativity, create a powerful material and technical basis for further development of civilisation and build a system of humanistic values. For centuries, the university has been associated with a particular social community committed to serving society. The

university has been known for developing and maintaining high ethical standards, rich social, cultural and spiritual life, as well as for being committed to serving society. Can these cultural universals exist in a consumerist society where market values are prevalent, where contradictions between different social groups and classes are constantly intensifying? Is it possible to harmonise the principle of university autonomy, which was the essence of the education reform, with free market? Can the university reform movement succeed in the society where free market realities (profit, market demand, tuition costs, etc.) are likely to level the university's public role and purpose? Does the present-day society need traditional universities at all or it could do without them? But in this case, how could the society retain a spiritual dimension of its existence?

British sociologist Gerard Delanty thinks that, today, the university will continue to play a central role in social and human development, combining knowledge and citizenship but in the context of global political culture. University can be a cosmopolitan institution that makes its contribution to global public culture by cultivating cosmopolitan citizenship [Delanty, 2008: p. 29]. Universities are not supposed to preserve the nation's cultural codes in the era of globalisation, when political, economic and cultural role of nation states weakens.

A new geopolitical conjuncture is hindering universities' return to the previous practice of state funding, which was typical of Western universities during the Cold War when science and culture became a scene of rivalry between super-states [Readings, 2011: p. 198]. So, having lost interest in universities, the state reduces funding of higher education and thus leaves universities adrift on the "institutional ocean", turning them into some kind of enterprise. Then universities build their own unique brand, create and conceptualise their images since the market conjuncture compels them to invest in PR-technologies and advertising. But this logical continuation of the "free market economy spirit" may cause proliferation of spurious university rankings based on manipulations with scores and performance indicators.

Burton R. Clark, a convinced adherent of innovative (that should be understood as entrepreneurial) university model, studied the experience of higher education institutions which managed to foster an entrepreneurial culture and obtain impressive results in bringing economic benefits to the society [Clark, 2011: p. 290–299]. However, Clark does not focus on the unintended social consequences of this innovation like transformation of the university's identity and corporate culture. His works demonstrate that the entrepreneurial university is guided by principles of economic efficiency measured in terms of profit, budget growth, cost and revenue optimisation, leaving aside all that excited and inspired classical university in the Modern Era: values of progress, scientific truth and high culture.

Another common tendency in the present-day university education consists in cutting a share of fundamental disciplines in curriculum (the so-called canonical knowledge). Broadly-educated graduates, in particular those who major in Humanities are not needed in today's society so much as before. University graduates will possess only field-specific knowledge, which will cause a decline in critical thinking, self-organisation skills and in the protest potential of civil society [Kagarlitskii, 2005].

One of the potential consequences of the neoliberal education reform is that it may lead to even greater dependence of society on powerful business corporations. For example, education reforms in Britain supposed that government loans for educational purposes would be given by private banks. According to Russian sociologist Aleksandr Tarasov, not only the state but also university graduates are “under the thumb” of big capital since payers of loans are obedient workforce due to their vulnerable financial position. The state (and its educational strategy as well) in this case will increase its reliance on private capital as every borrower is dependent on the lender [Tarasov, 2005].

The above-mentioned sociologist Craig Calhoun considers that once the university becomes a performer for business corporations, it actually loses the right to express disagreement and criticism. Moreover, it is often stipulated by legal documents regulating cooperation between the university and the corporation [Calhoun, 2007]. Noam Chomsky expresses a similar opinion about some current practices when big corporations give grants to fund secret and short-term research projects, having the right (as their owners) to control these projects at the stage of publication and practical use of research results [Chomsky, 2000]. In addition, subordination of universities to corporations will inevitably produce in academic environment a tangle of ideological mystifications in the interests of the ruling class [Chomsky, 2011].

Western social institutions and practices, including education systems, do not spread to other countries “mechanically” but combine with the country’s institutional and economic conjuncture, giving rise to various hybrid socio-cultural phenomena and a wide range of social consequences.

Introduction of neoliberal reforms into Ukrainian education system against the background of deep economic crisis will significantly restrict access to higher education because of reduction in number of higher education institutions and state-sponsored places where students can get university degree for free (the latter have already decreased by 15.6% compared to 2014 and by 21.6% compared to 2013). So, universities will be certainly forced to search additional funding sources, primarily by raising tuition fees.

The education reform in Ukraine is accompanied by decline in social well-being of academic staff and decrease in social significance of the profession of a research scientist or a lecturer. According to several surveys held by sociologists of the People’s Ukrainian Academy among lecturers of Kharkiv higher educational institutions, Ukraine’s higher education system is now encountering the following problems: poorly equipped research laboratories (51.6%), lowering quality of education (45.2%), a sharp devaluation of the lecturers’ social status and researchers’ work (32.3%), chronic underfunding (the so-called “residual funding”¹) of education (32.3%), inadequate pension provision for academic staff (29.1%) [Kiva, 2011: p. 150].

At the same time, both academic staff and student communities do not have enough opportunities to discuss issues related to the education reform, which has been confirmed by experts. For example, Oleksii Yakubin, an expert analyst and

¹ According to the principle of “residual funding”, Ukraine’s public education sector is the last to get state funding.

lecturer of the Sociology Department at the NTUU “KPI”, in his speech at the above-mentioned round table conference “The first year of the education reform: outcomes, threats, and development models” emphasised the lack of well-developed mechanism for cooperation between lecturers, students and professional associations on the one hand and government bodies on the other. Such a mechanism would provide an opportunity to discuss the implementation of education reform and thus ensure transparency of government actions (like government-initiated reduction in the number of academic disciplines and specialities, which contradicts the principle of university autonomy although this principle has been widely declared).

The expert discussions have revealed some other problems. Chairman of the Taras Shevchenko Kyiv National University Independent Students’ Union Roman Leksikov noted that at present university administrative bodies are trying to usurp the functions of student governments, which the Ministry of Education and Science granted to them. Moreover, student governments are completely loyal to university administrations and therefore hardly represent the interests of students: “Student government bodies cannot get any funding due to the Ministry of Finance’s moratorium on the use of special university funds; university administration prevents students from choosing lecturers and elective courses”.

Other experts pointed out the necessity of searching after feasible alternatives to the neoliberal education reform. For instance, Maria Ivancheva presented a Latin American model of higher education currently used in Venezuela.

Basic principles of this model include free access to higher education, distribution of governing functions between students, faculties and University’s administration, financial and administrative autonomy of the University, application of students’ knowledge and skills in solving urgent social problems. These principles were successfully put into practice due to establishment of the Bolivarian University of Venezuela (2003), which is an extensive nationwide network of campuses. University’s branch campuses cover almost the whole country, thus making higher education geographically accessible to every citizen. Being intended to prevent discrimination in getting a university degree, the Venezuelan model does not have any mechanism for students’ selection. The learning process is carried out within a field project involving students in practical work with remote rural communities or marginalised urban ones. So, learning does not have to be confined to a classroom (or another special area) anymore [Muliavka, 2015]. The Venezuelan experience of higher education reforms contrasts strongly with the Chilean neoliberal model of the 1980–1990s, which contributed to the commercialisation of higher education. In fact, it was a shift from one type of political culture to quite another. The former regarded education as a fundamental right to culture while the latter placed at the forefront a user’s freedom of choice considering him as a consumer rather than as a citizen” [Pitton, 2007: p. 257].

In the opinion of Viktoriia Muliavka, an analyst of the Institute of Social Relations (Kyiv), an important measure which would favour the introduction of some elements of the Bolivarian model into Ukraine’s higher education system is prioritisation of the principle of university autonomy not only in designing curricula but also in selecting students and conferring academic degrees and titles on lecturers, which has not been provided by a new law on higher education. So, the urgent task at present is to develop and implement effective anti-corruption

mechanisms and methods of public control for ensuring fairness and transparency in student selection and award of academic degrees/titles; otherwise the university autonomy may lead to even more corruption instead of improving access to higher education.

Conclusion

Being intended to adapt higher education system to new market demands, the above-mentioned reform can offer fundamentally new opportunities, such as university autonomy, multi-level education, increasing academic mobility, flexible curriculum, etc. A university degree is supposed to be gained at a student's own expense and thus considered as an investment for ensuring a competitive advantage in the labour market. However, according to experts, introduction of Western neoliberal standards and practices into Ukraine's higher education system may have unfavourable consequences like rise in tuition fees, restricting access to higher education (especially for low-income students), dismissal of academic staff on grounds of redundancy and increase in the unemployment rate. Moreover, universities' growing dependence on market institutions cannot help but affect their identity. Will the universities continue to reproduce values and standards of high culture and transmit fundamental knowledge or they will have to modify their social role in accordance with pragmatic goals of free market and values of the consumer society — that is a question of crucial importance. Traditional identity and academic freedom of classical universities can be preserved only if their social mission is revised but not levelled.

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