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**THE MARKETISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION  
- SYMPTOMS, CONTROVERSIES, TRENDS**

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**The marketisation of higher education - symptoms, controversies,  
trends**

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**Keywords:** *marketisation of higher education; higher education marketing; changes in higher education marketing*

### **Abstract**

**Research background:** Marketisation of higher education accompanying the development of a market economy having expressed, among others, the "imitation" of management models specific to the enterprise sector, an adaptation of the market terminology, changing roles of students and the importance of their satisfaction with the study causes still a lot of controversy in the academic community, dividing it into supporters and opponents of the current process with a strong predominance of the first group.

**Purpose of the article:** The aim of this article is to present the arguments and opinions of supporters and opponents of the process of marketization of higher education with a particular emphasis on changes in students roles at nowadays universities. In the article the results of desk research as well as the author's own research will be used.

**Methodology/methods:** Research carried out by the author were of a qualitative nature and were conducted with an application of In depth Interview method because of the need for full and cogent opinions of the respondents. The research was carried out among 16 representatives of Polish universities, i.e. among Deputy Chancellors (for marketing and development of the university) or departments managers responsible for marketing of the university. For the study there were selected two (public and private) colleges of 8 Polish cities that are capitals of provinces or districts. As measuring instruments, the study used an interview scenario with an average degree of standardization and a voice recorder. Interviews were carried out at the premises of the universities, in the period from 2015 - 2016. They lasted between 1-2,5 hours, depending on the degree of involvement of the university in marketing activities.

**Findings:** Supporters of marketisation argue that this process will turn universities into more flexible, more efficient and more responsive to the needs of society, the economy, students and parents institutions. Opponents pay attention to the cultural, intellectual and pedagogic consequences of this process. Both groups conclude that there is no turning back from this process and it cannot be avoided.

### **Introduction**

Since the late 1970s, the culture of academic life in Western countries has undergone some changes. The growing competition in the higher education sector and the fight for students, staff, and financial resources have become a determinant of the marketization process, which is reflected in imitation of business models, an adaptation of market terminology, activity and even aggression in marketing practices (Williams, 1995, pp. 170-193; Judson & Taylor, 2014, p.51) of universities as well as in the changing

roles of students and the importance of their satisfaction. In Poland this process started much later, which was connected with the development of the market economy in the 1990s.

Especially important for Polish higher education sector in the field of marketisation was the Act of 12 September 1990 on higher education, which allowed the formation of private universities. It influenced (among other factors such as an increase in educational aspirations of young people and a baby boom which lasted until 2002.) on the so-called educational boom which reflected in the increased number of students and the universities. The number of students in Poland increased from 404 thousand in 1990/1991 to 1 941 thousand in the peak year 2006/2007 (Higher Education Institutions and their Finances in 2012, 2013). Since then the number has been constantly decreasing. In the academic year 2013/2014 at 434 universities of all types (public 132 with 75.6% of all students and 302 private) above 1 469.4 thousand students were educated (Higher Education Institutions and their Finances in 2014, 2015; Hall & Witek, 2016, pp. 207-208).

The situation of Polish universities, determined by changes in their environment, forces them to look for effective ways to compete for candidates' attention and to attract students in a more effective way than the competition, which implies modeling on market players with experience in this field, i.e. companies using various activities and methods and seeking more and more innovative and effective approaches (Witek & Hall, 2016, 212) to achieve a competitive advantage on a given market.

The specific nature of higher education, and in particular the specific nature of the university, which is education and training, has led to numerous, richly-argued academic discussions related to the adaptation of the above-mentioned business activities and methods.

The aim of this article is to present the arguments and opinions of supporters and opponents of the process of marketization of higher education with a particular emphasis on changes in students roles at nowadays universities. In the article the results of desk research as well as the author's own research will be used.

### **Marketization symptoms, advocates and opponents arguments - theoretical framework**

The marketisation of higher education is the process of application of the economic theory of the market to the provision of higher education. The process seems to be unstoppable (Jones-Devitt & Samiei, 2011, p.87).

Young (2002) defines a modern university as a bureaucratic machine where there are no teachers and students but "suppliers" and "consumers".

As a result, researchers may feel anxious and alienated from students (Gibbs, 2011, s. 52).

Gibbs (2011, p.52) and Norris (2006, 459) are opposed to the growing influence of government and corporations on the higher education sector and the functioning of education under the dictation of the market.

Marketization of university education is also referred to as an "epidemic" an „ethical dilemma” (Natale & Doran, 2012, pp. 187-196) and as a "paradigm shift" in the area of higher education throughout the western world (Newman & Jahdi, 2009, pp. 1-11). One of the reasons for the criticism of marketization is the fact that the educational outcomes of students as a result of this process are not improving (Arum & Roska, 2011). And Moelswoth et al. (2009) focus on replacing students' transformations as academics and critical thinkers into students as consumers (Judson & Taylor, 2014, p.52).

In general, according to Judson & Taylor (2014, p.52), there is little evidence of the benefits of higher education marketization.

The anti-marketers vehemently deny that markets and higher education can happily co-exist. For them, the conjunction of higher education and markets are anathema on two grounds - pedagogical and social (Barnett, 2011, p.43-45). Furedi (2011, p.2) adds (in addition to pedagogical) the cultural and intellectual effects of marketization.

The most anxious effect of marketization is an ability to transform the relationship between researchers and learners into the relationship between a service provider and a customer. The concept of customer, derived from TQM, in relation to a student has even become a kind of a development symbol of higher education market (Furedi, 2011, p.2). So, that the student may take on some of the characteristics of a customer is not in itself problematic. The point turns on what it means for the student to become a customer. Especially danger is the situation when the student comes to the view that his or her higher education can be bought like any other product or service (Barnett, 2011, p.46), when the student adopts a 'commodified' view of his or her learning with an eye to the short term (Gibbs, 2008, pp. 269-78). Nowadays changes of higher education leads to a denial of responsibility on the part of the student (Barnett, 2011, p.46). According to McMillan and Cheney (1996), a metaphor for student as a customer distracts learners from the role of co-producers of knowledge (Gajda, 2009). It is also not the right approach to focus on a customer satisfaction as the primary goal of the educational process (Molesworth et al., 2011, pp.149-151).

The student model as a customer, with its striving for customer satisfaction, despite its critique in literature, is a source of numerous benefits to the university. In HE, as in business generally, the relationship between student

satisfaction and student retention, progression and graduation has been established (Kara & de Shields, 2004; Molesworth, et al., 2011, p.145). Many universities have adopted the student model as a customer, e.g. The 1994 Group has adopted the business idea that "the customer is always right" and that flattering customers is the right path (Furedi, 2011, p.3). The presence of a market may lead to a student taking a heightened interest in his or her learning. A market situation might also lead, to a heightened attention to the teaching function on the part of the student's lecturers and tutors (Barnett, 2011, pp.46-47).

### **Method of the Research**

The aim of the research was to get acquainted with the opinion of university representatives on the marketization process and modern university marketing, their manifestations and perspectives, with particular emphasis on student satisfaction and loyalty. The results of the study presented later in this paper form a part of a much wider range of the whole.

Research carried out by the author were of a qualitative nature and were conducted with an application of In depth Interview method because of the need for full and cogent opinions of the respondents. The research was carried out among 16 representatives of Polish universities, i.e. among Deputy Chancellors (for marketing and development of the university) or departments managers responsible for marketing of the university. For the study there were selected two (public and private) colleges of 8 Polish cities that are capitals of provinces or districts. As measuring instruments, the study used an interview scenario with an average degree of standardization and a voice recorder. Interviews were carried out at the premises of the universities, in the period from 2015-2016. They lasted between 1-2,5 hours, depending on the degree of involvement of the university in marketing activities.

### **Findings of research**

This part presents the results of the research carried out, including the selected comments from university representatives related to marketization in the higher education sector. The first question asked the representatives of the university concerned the intensification of the university marketization process – does it take place what are its symptoms?

All respondents stated unequivocally that this process was becoming more noticeable and intense and was being observed in many areas of the university. Most often, the promotional activities of a university were mentioned, mainly those related to the acquisition of students, but also organizational and product-related (new majors of study) ones. The attention was

also paid to the intensification and business aspect (often also referred to as "unethical" or even "hysterical") character of competition between universities. Below there are presented some selected statements from university representatives.

*"We are definitely dealing with the intensification of such activities. First and foremost, it is a very intensive development of promotional activities - PR and e-marketing".*

*"There is certainly a more intense fight between the universities. It is a pity that this intensification does not concern cooperation".*

*"Intensification of market-based activities is primarily due to the increased competition in the HEI market, greater awareness of potential customers, greater information needs, but also greater opportunities for low cost and more reliable customer experience. Mostly I mean social media".*

*"We are creating new majors of study that respond to the interest of contemporary youth - that is the main reason".*

The next question was about prospects for the development of marketing and university marketization in the next years. None of the respondents had any doubt that the activity of the university in these areas would intensify. In almost all responses, the growing role of the Internet has been emphasized, with particular emphasis on social networking, as well as the ever-widening application of revolutionary information technology.

*"Certainly, the university activity on the Internet will develop. But in this fight private universities win due to the speed of decision-making and perhaps a little better understanding that we are operating in a very competitive market. These actions will also be more creatively courageous".*

Further questions were related to student satisfaction, with particular emphasis on the importance of student satisfaction for a university and the way of its assessment. According to the results of the research, at almost all universities researched there are implemented student satisfaction surveys that use the most common CAI surveys, but also other methods (such as IDI), and they have a very large and even "strategic" importance.

*"At our university, a great deal of emphasis is placed on student service. Authorities pay great attention to the service at a very high level. Personnel who does not respect the student was dismissed. Service is for students".*

*"Satisfaction of students is a strategic goal of our university. We conduct satisfaction research using many research methods, including CAWI, FGI, IDI. We also analyze the career of students after graduation".*

*"Student satisfaction surveys are implemented systematically with the use of different methods. These are mainly online surveys. These studies are so important that students are forced to do them - they cannot enter the*



system where they have an electronic index if they do not complete the survey”.

One of the most important aspects of student satisfaction is their satisfaction with didactics and relationship with a teacher. The respondents were asked about the research on the evaluation of the didactic classes and their teachers, including the usefulness and consequences of such research. There are presented a few selected statements:

*"An online survey at the end of the semester, obligatory, filled by all students. Utility? It is obviously high. The conclusions are analyzed after each semester. Students' opinions are taken into account during the employee's periodic assessment. Three-fold negative ratings from students result in a dismissal”.*

*"In addition to conducting surveys, the Rector also meets with student groups. Sometimes he makes an anonymous questionnaire, where students write "what hurts most", then, sometimes, he appoints a special committee that investigates the matter”.*

The studies are carried out at all universities in accordance with the statutory obligation, but they go much further than the statutory guidelines (conducted minimum once per two years). For all universities they are very important, as evidenced by, among others, the dismissal of employees negatively assessed by students.

## **Conclusions**

On the basis of the analysis of secondary sources related to the subject as well as from the original research of the author, it can be stated that there is multi-market marketization of higher education. This process is constantly growing and the activities connected with it and the tools applied are increasingly widespread. Despite opposition and criticism of some academic community associated with its negative consequences, there is certainly no retreat from it. The only possible action is mitigation and prevention of negative effects, including: changing the relationship between students and academic teachers based on the relationship between recipients and business donors, or the unreflective pursuit of students satisfaction with didactic classes conditioned by their high grades, their relationship with students or their personality. The pursuit of student satisfaction and its measurement should not raise doubts when taking into account the amount of benefits this phenomenon brings to a university, with particular emphasis on the image of the university and the key role played by students and university graduates in its selection by the candidates for the studies but in selected areas, not including, for example, the necessary time or engagement to obtain the appropriate level of knowledge and skills or the thematic scope of the implemented modules.

It should be added that in the studies conducted, the identification of students as customers was relatively rare, and was mainly used by non-public university representatives in relation to their students. However, the enormous role of student satisfaction surveys and teacher evaluations at all universities researched and the consequences of this research, e.g. the dismissal of academics who are negatively assessed by students, indicate such a customer approach to the subject.

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