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ETHICAL ASPECTS OF THE QUALITY ASSESSMENT IN SLOVAKIA[1]

VASIL GLUCHMAN

Abstract: The aim of the paper is to study socio-ethical aspects of Slovak higher education policy in the context of contemporary discussions on university assessment criteria. I conduct an ethical analysis and assess the criteria introduced in Slovakia that consider employment opportunities and the graduate unemployment rate, publishing in high impact journals, participation in European research programmes, etc., which often discriminates against the humanities and social sciences. On the other hand, I also point to the absence of a social contract regarding the common good provided by Slovak universities, drawbacks of a legislative nature which often provide a basis for unethical behaviour within the Slovak academic community and, most often, problems concerning academic ethics in contemporary Slovakia.

Key words: Slovakia; humanities; social sciences; higher education policy; quality assessment; social ethics.

Introduction

The quality of universities is often discussed universally; there are a great number of different views of the reasons for the present situation and possible solutions to them. Economic, or scientometrical, approaches generally dominate the discussions, which include topics such as university funding, graduate employment opportunities, scientific outcomes, publications, especially in high impact journals, participation in 7th framework research programmes, etc. The debates in western countries concern important issues of scientific research control (including university research and teaching) and assessment criteria, the extent to which scientific findings can drive economic growth, contribute to technological innovations, whether all scientific findings can be materialised into a tradable product, i.e. whether academic capitalism is possible in the humanities and social sciences, etc. (Bailey & Freedman, 2011; Collini, 2012; Molesworth, Scullion, & Nixon, 2011; Nussbaum, 2010; Slaughter & Leslie, 1999; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Many point out that it is mainly the humanities and social science disciplines that suffer in the above model of academic

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capitalism (Barnett, 2011; Collini, 2012; Faulkner, 2011; Nussbaum, 2010; Stöckelová, 2009; Walton, 2011).

My aim is to analyse quality assessment of higher education provision in Slovakia in the context of professional, or academic, ethics. This topic must be approached from a broader perspective and not merely focus on individual problems within academic ethics as it is typical among Slovak ethicists interesting in some issues of academic ethics.[2] Since the socio-ethical, professional-ethical and individual-ethical context is dealt with in professional ethics (Airaksinen, 1998; Bayles, 1989; Gluchman, 2014) then the same must apply to academic ethics. This means there is a need to consider the ethical and moral aspects of quality assessment at universities and colleges in Slovakia; therefore, the activities of university teachers in Slovakia must be also considered because they are a part of problems with quality assessments in Slovakia. Since this is a large and complex area, I will focus on the socio-ethical context of problems concerning the quality assessment.[3] First of all, we must consider perceptions of contemporary higher education in and outside Slovakia alongside perceptions of the contemporary role of universities, or of where society perceives the common good provided by universities to lie.

Analysing the contemporary situation at British universities, Stefan Collini concluded that in the past two decades, the character of British universities had changed significantly since many higher education colleges (offering applied undergraduate degree courses and unable to award their own degrees) acquired the status of universities, which means that British higher education generally now offers more applied and practical courses, whilst the importance of academic higher education is on the decrease. In his view, education should typically offer more than merely practical training; the kind of research performed at university must not be fully decided by the immediate needs of the job market; in his opinion, universities perform a wide range of activities and have the institutional autonomy they require to carry out their intellectual activities (Collini, 2012, p. 7).

Assessment criteria for universities in Slovakia

In Slovakia, the emphasis in the assessment criteria is predominantly on the skills related to the various professions and on training graduates for their future careers. Universities are assessed according to the rate at which graduates are able to find employment, especially on finding employment in the area relevant to their studies, and the average graduate salary according to university attended and field studied. If one were to follow this approach entirely, then, to meet this requirement, secondary schooling, or, at most, undergraduate

[2] For instance, Gabriela Platková Olejárová, Marta Gluchmanová and Renáta Králiková have highlighted some of the issues and problems in academic ethics in Slovakia; the first two have mainly dealt with problems at the individual or personal level of academic ethics in Slovakia (Gluchmanová, 2012; 2013; Platková Olejárová, 2012a; 2012b; 2014a; 2014b), while the latter has looked at professional issues in academic ethics in Slovakia, especially regarding the existence of codes of ethics at Slovak colleges and universities (Králiková, 2009).

[3] Ethics of social consequences as a form of satisficing non-utilitarian consequentialism is the methodological basis of the research.

university degrees would suffice, as undergraduate training could focus exclusively on work skills. Here too a problem arises for colleges and universities, as there is a significant delay from the moment the change is introduced and then approved by the Accreditation Committee, before being implemented and the first student cohort graduating from that programme. The question arises as to whether universities, amid such rapid changes in the requirements for work experience, are in fact able to respond dynamically enough to meet such requirements. It may well be that it would be easier to educate students who are more generally trained and who then, at the start of their careers, can train further according to the requirements of the job, such as undertaking continual professional development where graduates adjust to the specific requirements of a job or employer. This might be more flexible than expecting and requiring universities under the existing system to respond dynamically to the current requirements of the job or the employer.

Another question arises, namely whether there is justification for requiring the quality of all universities (including those that teach the social sciences and humanities) to be assessed on a requirement to provide the work skills demanded by business, as, while this can clearly be met by technology courses, possibly as early as at initial stages of degree programmes, and can be met by applied ones offered by colleges, the situation is different in non-applied social science and humanities programmes where the direct link with a profession is not so obvious (Gluchman, 2012; 2015; Matlovič, 2014; Višňovský, 2014). The issue of fulfilling degree-content requirements and the needs of society is, however, only one part of the problem regarding university capabilities. For academic ethics, it is vital that society defines the common interest or the specific common good that universities should provide for society. That means agreeing on what expectations the public have of universities and also on what aspects of universities society, or the public, wishes to fund, i.e. whether it expects and is willing to fund education as training for future employment. Do the public appreciate the extent to which universities are and are not able to respond to the current requirements of the labour market and prepare graduates who will fulfil the demands of employers? Or will the public require universities to produce educated people with a wide-ranging knowledge who are creative and pro-active in both work and private life? Does it want people who will shape their own lives and those of their relatives, their communities and society as a whole, and who will build and improve democracy in their country? This goal of humanities and social sciences courses is one that is favoured by Nussbaum. In her view, an education in the humanities helps students form critical thinking and overcome limitations resulting from religious, political, ideological, or racial exclusivity of certain nations, groups, races, etc., and it is important in building and developing a democratic society (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 7). Neil Faulkner holds a similar view, claiming that, apart from reflecting on the technical aspects of education and skills, the public also needs to ask important questions about society, engage in democratic discussion, and make informed and free decisions as to what society's priorities are (Faulkner, 2011, p. 35). There is also a third alternative; the public may want universities that produce graduates with university degrees regardless of the kind of knowledge or skills they have. This is particularly the case given that the number of people with university degrees in Slovakia is approaching that of developed countries.

Neil W. Hamilton claims that there must be a form of social contract between higher education institutions and society on the nature of the common good they provide to society

and this would then serve as a basis for the work carried out by universities (Hamilton, 2002, p. 3). With reference to discussions in Great Britain, Collini points out that education must be understood as a public, not a private good (Collini, 2012, p. X). I hold the opinion that the common good of Slovak society must be defined long-term, keeping in mind the future needs of society, not merely in the context of the immediate needs of the labour market, or to ensure that the number of graduates reflect those in other countries.

Thus, assessing the quality of universities on the basis of comparisons of graduate employment opportunities and graduate starting salaries is a step in the wrong direction, which could, in the context of academic ethics, be called unethical, since the universities and the assessments then become dependent on rather changeable and inappropriate criteria, or factors, while the common good of society itself becomes malleable, unclear, and hard to define.

There is clearly a justifiable need to assess universities since public universities are mainly funded from public resources and in Slovakia's case this is also partly the case with private universities. What is rather controversial is whether university quality can merely be assessed using economic or bibliometric criteria and whether the quality of universities can actually be objectively assessed according to such criteria. The above approach favours certain criteria (those which are easiest to measure) and does not take into account a great number of external factors which considerably influence the criteria applied in the first place. The economic criteria do not differentiate between the nature of courses in technology and natural science (and also medicine) on the one hand and humanities and social science courses on the other. The vocations of graduates from, for instance, engineering or pharmaceutical faculties is quite clear but less so in the case of graduates of non-teacher-training courses in history, philosophy, ethics, etc., offered by arts faculties. This is mainly because engineering courses, for example, are designed so that students master the current knowledge and skills in that area, while history courses, for example, are not only about mastering current knowledge but about graduates growing and developing their personalities, developing critical thinking on processes in society, becoming involved in the community, and disseminating democratic and ethical values.

Education in humanities and social sciences and economic assessment criteria

In her book, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy needs Humanities* (2010), Martha Nussbaum urges that a unilateral emphasis on economic interpretations of the efficiency of education will, in future, lead to all world nations producing generations of useful machines but not citizens capable of critical thinking, able to question traditions and to understand the meaning sufferings and achievements of other people (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 2). She criticises the model of thinking and policy making whose only aim is the economic growth of nations. She points out that a model of education that is economic growth oriented then has to be restricted to developing basic skills and the ability to read and count, rather than including knowledge of history, culture or art (Nussbaum, 2010, pp. 10-20). She also states that the development of a humanities-based education has had a primarily positive impact on the shaping of democratic society, since it encourages critical thinking, helping people to better understand the events in the world, overcome prejudice, and understand other people and

build empathy for those suffering and in pain (Nussbaum, 2010, pp. 25-26). Ronald Barnett also holds the opinion that education not only contributes to economic growth, but also brings about significant benefits for society and the globalised world in the form of educated and cultivated, socially responsible, citizens who generally live a healthy lifestyle (Barnett, 2011, p. 45). This is connected to the fact that, after more than twenty years of social transformation, Slovak society is not ready to accept, or make use of, the knowledge gained by humanities graduates such as those who have studied ethics, or applied ethics. While in some other countries, there is a wide range of employment opportunities for ethics graduates, and especially applied ethics, such as ethical experts, i.e. professionals who provide advice to help solve complicated ethical and moral problems in a great number of professions, e.g. in economics, health care, nursing, advertising, etc. In Slovakia, there is considered to be no such need for similar positions despite the fact that there are a great number of ethical and moral problems in Slovak society, and that there are codes of ethics relating to many areas of life and work, as there are in many companies. There is a call for improving Slovak political life, corruption in public and state sectors is fought against; however, graduates from these disciplines who have been educated and trained to resolve ethical and moral problems in society cannot find employment, as Slovak society has not reached the point where it realises they are needed. Often statements on the need for ethics and morality in political and economic life, public administration and so forth are merely rhetorical.

Improving the educational level of the population is a much more important outcome of the work of humanities and social science faculties. However, this does not mean Slovakia should hand out university degrees so it can close the gap on the percentage of the population with a university degree compared to western countries. First of all, higher education in the humanities and social sciences should be directed at developing the capacity to think critically and creatively, the ability to cultivate the personality and build a truly knowledgeable society, one that is not only knowledgeable from the viewpoint of producing new findings in technology, the natural sciences (and medicine), but one that is also marked by knowledge of its own system, its problems and ways of solving them; a society formed of educated and cultivated people who are not only consumers of the latest products of the information and communication age, but are also able to accept and create a more serious culture than that provided by commercial television channels. If one does not wish for a Slovakia that will be restricted to producing cars, steel, metal plates and electro-technical appliances, this must be considered now, and there must be sufficient support to provide the young generation with an education in the humanities and social sciences. We must realise that it is not only technology, natural science, medical and other similar degree programmes that contribute to the common good of society and to the humanities and social sciences as well. This must become the ethical imperative for the present era; otherwise, Slovak society will become a technocratic one, reduced to economic efficiency, usefulness and other similar assessment criteria, which will, in the end, harm the further development of Slovak society and its members.

Another issue is that an economic approach to assessing the quality of Slovak higher does not take into consideration economic differences between richer and poorer regions (Bratislava, Trnava, Žilina, and Košice regions on the one hand and Prešov, Ružomberok and Banská Bystrica on the other). I consider this to be inappropriate, and it could be

characterised as unethical on the part of the Ministry of Education and other higher education managing bodies in Slovakia, particularly if we compare the unemployment rate of university and college graduates, because total unemployment in Bratislava was 5.75% in May 2015, with that of graduates from the University of Prešov when the unemployment rate in Prešov region was 16.42%. Comparing starting salaries of graduates in Bratislava and the Prešov region is equally inappropriate, or unethical, since the average salary in the Prešov region is only approximately 67% of the average salary in Bratislava. Marián Zachar points out that university quality generally only accounts for 16% of the total graduate unemployment rate; he considers the country's overall unemployment to be much more significant and that that there is a correlation between levels of education and the unemployment rate in Slovakia. The most serious problem, he suggests, is the unemployment of people with secondary school education not that of university graduates (Zachar, 2012). It must, however, be stated that in the European Union as a whole, high youth unemployment rates are a problem, which means the quality of universities in Slovakia is not the most significant problem or the primary reason for Slovak youth unemployment. If that were the case, one would have to establish that higher education is of poor quality either in the whole of the EU or at least in the countries with high graduate unemployment rates. I regard the use of statistics which do not differentiate or take account of external factors influencing the outcomes of the work of universities across the regions of Slovakia to be unethical, since they misguide and misinform the public and manipulate public opinion by judging the quality of colleges or universities on the basis of incomparable criteria.

The redemptive value of these statistics would be much higher and the quality assessment of universities ethically justified if truly relevant criteria were taken into consideration which judge the quality of universities on, for instance, the qualifications held by full-time university lecturers (so called "flying" teachers and especially professors) employed at the faculty or department, and lecturers for particular programmes, their research, publications, including those of their doctoral students, and also world language and international publications, primarily in developed countries, participation in world congresses and important international conferences. These data have much higher redemptive value on the quality of university lecturers employed by a university. Equally, these criteria are ethically more appropriate than the economic criteria discussed above. At the same time, one must keep in mind that these criteria cannot be used in the same way across the technology, natural science, medical, humanities and social science disciplines, as there are major differences in opportunities to publish and carry out scientific research.

The need for a social contract on the common good regarding higher education and universities in Slovakia

This, however, means that Slovak society (and political elite) should finally agree on a definition of the common good provided by universities and adopt a higher education policy which clearly relates to the present situation, the goals to be achieved and, equally, the methods for doing so. It is essential that all political parties are committed to such a higher education policy, that they respect its objectives and that they are not changed by the political establishment or when a new government takes office; otherwise, every time the government

changes so too will the goals and objectives of higher education policy. The absence in Slovakia of a higher education policy and an agreement on the common good universities and colleges provide to society is the greatest social and ethical problem facing the Slovak public sector since the fall of communism in 1989. Unless there are clearly defined goals, higher education policy as a whole will resemble a trial and error method which is highly ineffective and costly on the macro-social level. The "invisible hand of the market" clearly does not work in Slovakia, as higher educational policy is not set according to the criteria above in relation to Slovak society (Kosová, 2014; Matlovič, 2014; Mihina, 2014; Višňovský, 2014).

The public are often presented with data showing that Slovakia has a large number of universities, that Slovak higher education is of poor quality and that students choose to go abroad, most commonly to the Czech Republic, etc. This is all true to a certain extent; however, one of the main socio-ethical problems with Slovak higher education is the legislation passed by previous governments and parliaments. This has created the conditions for an increasing number of universities to be established drawing on common funding sources. Yet, the number of highly qualified academics in Slovakia remains approximately the same (mainly those who are associate professors and professors), and so many universities and university courses operate because of "flying professors" who have full-time contracts at three or four different places, or, possibly, more. The situation is often similar with course supervisors who come from abroad and, apart from their academic title and supervisory role contribute minimally to the faculty, department, programme and students. This applies equally to many lecturers who do not supervise courses but are able to profitably utilize their working time or their academic title of associate professor or professor at many universities. This is also true of a number of colleagues from universities in neighbouring countries (the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Ukraine) who work in Slovakia either as programme supervisors or hold other positions at universities but have no real impact on the quality of that institution.

However, the unethical behaviour of universities and faculty management must be pointed out. Instead of only offering what they can afford (which in this case means only providing higher education courses that can be staffed internally without "purchasing" and programme supervisors and lecturers who are non-resident or from other countries), they find themselves in a vicious cycle. In an effort to ensure the continuation of accredited courses, they succumb to pressure from employers and students and attempt to gain accreditation for courses for which they have already accepted students and to provide work or ensure the survival of their employees. This is why, as required, they search for available programme supervisors and lecturers first of all in Slovakia, and then in nearby, or more distant countries. This unethical conduct by university management can be compared to a hamster on a treadmill. This is how Slovak higher education policy, a great number of colleges and universities, programmes and departments may end up, since there will always be more new universities, and the existing qualified lecturers will have to float between universities without making any progress (in terms of self-development and acquiring new knowledge as they will have no time left to develop professionally). According to Hamilton and Kerr, the purpose of being a lecturer is to produce knowledge-based research and spread knowledge through teaching (Hamilton, 2002, p. 63; Kerr, 1994, p. 12). John D. Bruhn and his colleagues claim that the reputation of

colleges and universities is primarily based on the research and publishing essential to their functioning (Bruhn, 2002, p. 474). Can "floating" lecturers produce knowledge? They do share knowledge (albeit to a rather restricted extent where publication is concerned), just not their own. They disseminate the knowledge they had acquired by a certain point in the past but have been standing still since then, as, while teaching at universities and holding other positions and doing other activities, they have hardly any time left for further study.

This, I believe, is the most serious problem regarding higher education policy and academic ethics in Slovakia. The fact that higher education operates this way in Slovakia is highly unethical, as it is not based on respect for the profession, the purpose of the vocation, or universities pursuing their former role and mission, but rather is the pretence of providing higher education while, in reality, pursuing individual or group interests. A higher educational policy set out in the above way enables a great number of individuals to use legislation drawn up unethically for their own gains, demoralising the rest of society as it enables individuals to variously draw on common resources and obtain unjustified and undeserved benefits. As a result, this also leads to a loss of public trust in Slovak colleges and universities. Bruhn and his colleagues point out that this is an invisible cost that has an enormous impact on the non-financial aspects of the work performed at these institutions. In their opinion, this also leads to a worsening in relationships within the academic community, the erosion of fundamental aspects of the academic profession, the lowering of academia's reputation as a whole as well as that of particular academic institutions (Bruhn, 2002, pp. 484-486). On the other hand, there is a lack of funding to ensure that university lecturers who perform above standard in scientific research, publishing and teaching are sufficiently remunerated as the resources are used to fund work by university lecturers not fulfilling all their roles. I consider it unethical that university and faculty management do not remunerate above-standard performances by full-time employees striving for the true good and reputation of the institution. Instead, everybody is paid equally; those who perform efficiently as well as those who only perform for the imaginary good of the institution and its students.

George M. Schurr stated that a profession is as good as its ethics (Schurr, 1982, p. 334) and one must admit that there is a lot of work ahead for Slovak higher education policymakers to improve academia at the professional level and also on the ethical level. One could even say the academic ethics issue should be resolved first before the quality of Slovak higher education can be improved.

Conclusion

Slovak higher education policy does not currently conform to the fundamental principles and values of academic ethics, as it is unable to fulfil the goals and needs of a developing Slovak society. Moreover these are only intuitively known since they have not been sufficiently clearly defined. From the viewpoint of academic ethics, Slovak higher education policy has even greater drawbacks regarding the purpose and nature of the profession of university lecturer, as in many cases programmes, departments, and possibly, some faculties or universities, for the sake of individual or small group interests, sell out on the ethical values, principles and norms of the academic profession. The needs of society, the profession, students and other *stakeholders* are relegated to the periphery of everyone's attention, while

the immediate interests of individuals or small groups gain preference feeding off unethically drawn up legislation that enables the survival of university lecturers, programmes, departments and, possibly, non-science and non-publishing faculties at the expense of those who perform above average on a long-term basis and have been systematically building and developing their programmes and institutions. It is high time for a change: for the principles and values of academic ethics to be inscribed in Slovak higher education policy. Can the Slovak academic community prove its viability in the sense Bruhn and his colleagues defined as the general requirement for academic communities (Bruhn, 2002, pp. 486-488)?

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Institute of Ethics and Bioethics,
Faculty of Arts,
University of Prešov,
17 novembra 1,
08078 Prešov,
Slovakia
E-mail: vasil.gluchman@unipo.sk