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Strategies of higher education institutions towards postgraduate education in Poland

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the problem of the development of postgraduate education in Poland. It aims to analyse how the different types of higher education institutions (HEIs), such as public universities, public universities of applied sciences (UAS) and private sector organisations, engage in postgraduate learning. It draws data from 11 case studies of HEIs which were individually studied with the help of an analysis of institutional strategic documents, as well as 49 individual in-depth interviews with university leaders and academic staff involved in postgraduate education. Drawing on this data, the paper offers two major conclusions. The hierarchy of organisational resources determines the institutional policy of HEIs and provides an account of different levels of institutional involvement in the development of postgraduate studies. It demonstrates the reason private HEIs are the most active in the market of postgraduate education followed by UAS. Second, private HEIs depict typical features for the 'complete organisations' helping them to acquire the lion's share of the postgraduate market. However, public universities with traditional governance models remain relatively passive in this field, allowing individual academics to perform their business.

KEYWORDS

Lifelong learning;
postgraduate studies; higher
education institutions;
resource dependence theory;
Polish higher education

Introduction

Since the early 1990s, Polish higher education has been subject to ongoing changes and turbulences, impacting both its size and structure (Dobbins and Knill 2009; Kwiek 2014; Pinheiro and Antonowicz 2015). This is because its internal dynamics and major consequences have been thoroughly discussed in multiple studies specifically dedicated to the expansion of higher education (Kwiek 2014; Simonová and Antonowicz 2006), development of the private sector (Duczmal and Jongbloed 2007; Kwiek 2003), higher education policy (Antonowicz, Emanuel, and Anna 2020; Dziedziczak-Foltyn 2017), inequalities in access to education (Wasielwski 2013) and publication practices (Kulczycki, Aleksandra Rozkosz, and

Drabek 2019). Given the great interest in the transformation of Polish higher education, it is surprising to note that little attention has been paid to postgraduate education, which has gained both political and economic prominence over the years. Furthermore, postgraduate education also emerged as a growing business opportunity for higher education institutions (HEIs), which have recently experienced a severe decline in student numbers mostly due to the demographic low and lower education aspiration (Kwiek 2014, Antonowicz, Emanuel, and Anna 2020).

The paper is based on an empirical project investigating the development of postgraduate studies in Poland. It seeks to answer the following research question: What factors influence institutional involvement in developing postgraduate education and attracting presumed non-traditional students (Gegenfurther and Testers 2022)? The study draws from the resources dependence theory (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978), which explains the relationship between the behaviour of organisations and the external resources they require to survive and strive (Pfeffer and Salancik 2003). It assumes that HEIs, as organisational actors (Krücken and Meier 2006), respond to the demands of the external environment that controls critical resources. This may differ between the various types of higher education institutions.

The study rests on the assumption that HEIs do not take full advantage of the emerging market of postgraduates. Amongst the EU countries, Poland stands out with the lowest rate of educational activity among people over 25 years of age (Eurostat 2021). Approximately 100,000 individuals are currently enrolled in postgraduate programmes, and the statistics indicate that HEIs do not use their full potential to develop postgraduate programmes and contribute to lifelong learning. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to examine the way in which different types of HEIs, including public universities, public universities of applied sciences (UAS) and private sector organisations, engage in postgraduate learning.

The article is presented in the following manner. First, it discusses the development of the postgraduate studies market in Poland, before moving on to the methodological assumptions and description of the empirical material collection methods. The main section presents the results of the empirical investigation. Finally, the results and conclusions are discussed.

Postgraduate studies in Poland

Poland is experiencing the lowest participation rate in various forms of adult education in the EU. The average participation rate among people over 25 years of age in the EU was 10.9% in 2017 and 10.8% in 2021, compared to 4.0% (2017) and 5.4% (2021) in Poland, respectively. In a study covering a longer period (i.e. 12 months prior to this study), the EU average was found to be 43.7%, compared to 25.5% in Poland (Eurostat 2017, 2021).

However, postgraduate studies have been on the rise in Poland. In the past decade, the total number of graduates in Poland was around 1.5 million, accounting for nearly 10% of the workforce (GUS, 2010–2019). Although these dynamics have been slightly impeded in recent years (Table 1), the decline is primarily observed in the public sector, which is contrary to the trend observed among bachelor's and master's students. The Law (2018) outlines a general framework for postgraduate programmes, which stipulates that it is addressed to those who have completed at least the first cycle (bachelor) study programme; it must last a minimum of two semesters; and the programme corresponds to at least 30 ECTS credits. The postgraduate sector is primarily focused on professional education for non-traditional students whose number has increased from 33,000 in the early 1990s to reach a peak of 165,000 (2010) and settled to 103,000 in 2021.

The development of postgraduate studies has been unequally distributed among the various types of HEIs. Table 1 depicts that the private sector has been more effective in attracting candidates to their postgraduate programmes. Our preliminary research, as well as professional experience, allow us to assume that postgraduate education does enjoy particular priorities in the institutional policies across the higher education sector.

The development of postgraduate studies in Poland has been largely accelerated by the Lisbon Strategy, which underlined the social and economic significance of lifelong learning (LLL). LLL emerged in the aftermath of changes in the labour market, as well as new and flexible career models (Williams 2003). It encourages the development of continuous knowledge and the acquisition of new skills. The European Commission has articulated this approach in the Lisbon Strategy (2000), highlighting the central role of higher education in building the human capital of the EU. To this end, emphasis was placed on:

‘Giving higher priority to lifelong learning as a basic component of the European social model, including by encouraging agreements between the social partners on innovation and lifelong learning; by exploiting the complementarity between lifelong learning and adaptability through flexible management of working time and job rotation; and by introducing a European award for particularly progressive firms’.

LLL was introduced as a priority in the European Higher Education Area in 2009, automatically placing it at the centre of national public policies. This marked a strategic change for HEIs across Europe, urging them to recalibrate their strategies to address the demands of a new population of learners. The policy change was also acknowledged in the key Polish policy documents, such as *the Higher Education and Science Development Programme* (MNISW 2015), which highlighted the pivotal role of HEIs in the development of lifelong learning. It emphasised the need for the systemic implementation of the relevant legal regulations or the development

Table 1. Number of postgraduate students by HEI type between 2010 and 2020.

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
HEIs in total	165 078	162 049	144 041	130 433	120 833	127 517	131 461	131 825	131 433	118 475	103 045
Non-public HEIs	66 988	72 484	69 725	64 474	59 686	68 104	73 902	76 641	80 575	72 733	62 019
Public HEIs	98 080	89 925	74 316	65 759	61 147	59 413	57 559	55 184	50 858	45 742	41 026
Universities	45 259	41 892	33 286	27 967	25 477	24 536	21 996	20 664	18 536	ND	ND

of an incentive system, as well as the need to adapt Poland's HE system to accommodate the increasing number and diversity of users, including people of different ages, motives and needs. Similar conclusions were presented in *the Strategy for the Development of Higher Education* issued by another major policy actor, the Conference of Rectors of Academic Schools in Poland (KRASP), in 2010–2020. This document also underscored the growing importance of postgraduate education and indicated the strategic role of HEIs as its major providers. Despite these impressive ideas in the policy documents, postgraduate education has not been yet recognised in the national legislation as a priority for the HE system in Poland.

Nonetheless, the development of the postgraduate sector would not be dynamic without the impact of the HE system contraction (Kwiek 2013). Following the HE rapid expansion of (1990–2005), the expanding trend reversed due to the combination of the following two factors: (a) a demographic decline, commonly known as a 'demographic tsunami', and (b) the depletion of the reservoir of 'degree hunters' who stormed HE in the 1990s only to earn credentials. It opened a window of opportunity for them to advance in their professional careers, mostly related to public administration and large public companies, which had restricted access to senior positions to only those with university degrees (Antonowicz 2016; Antonowicz, Kwiek, and Westerheijden 2017). In 2006, the previously expanding system began to contract, with the student population decreasing by 40% to a record-low level of 1.23 million in 2019 (GUS 2019). Such a dramatic decline primarily hit the private HEIs that relied almost exclusively on tuition fees; it also impacted public HEIs due to the funding formula. The consequences of the demographic decline affected disproportional categories of HEIs. It negatively impacted the private sector, leading to high-profile closures, mergers and takeovers among HEIs, whose number ultimately dropped from 330 in 2010 to 218 at the end of 2022¹

Methodology

Selection of case studies

This analysis is part of a larger empirical study conducted between 2016 and 2018 in Poland. In principle, it is based on a multiple-case study (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, and Liao 2004; Yin 2017), which includes 11 HEIs. The sample includes (a) three public universities, (b) five private HEIs and (c) three (public) UAS. The complete list of HEIs under study is as follows:

- (1) Public: University of Applied Sciences in Elblag (UAS-1); University of Applied Sciences in Konin (UAS-2); University of Applied Sciences

- in Włocławek (UAS-3); University of Lodz (U-1); Nicolaus Copernicus University (U-2); University of Gdansk (U-3).
- (2) Non-public: WSB University in Torun (NPU-1); University of Humanities and Economics in Lodz (NPU-2); University of Health (NPU-3); Kujawy and Pomorze University in Bydgoszcz (NPU-4); University of Social Sciences and Humanities (NPU-5).

Each case study was investigated separately, and the research data were obtained from three different sources: (1) strategic documents, which are obligatory for public HEIs but are also voluntarily published by non-public HEIs; (2) 15 individual in-depth interviews with the representatives of the university authorities; and (3) 34 individual in-depth interviews with lecturers at postgraduate studies. Overall, the study drew on triangulation methods and sources to understand the institutional policy of HEIs towards postgraduate studies (Patton 1999).

Analysis of strategic documents

In this study, strategic institutional documents were used to assess the role of post-graduate education in institutional policy. To verify our assumption, we also examined the strategy of HEIs to examine how postgraduate education is presented in these documents. It was largely possible as, since 2011, all Polish (public) HEIs are legally obliged to prepare an institutional strategy (Article 1, Sections 51 and 53 of the Act of 18 March 2011 amending the Law on Higher Education, the Act on academic degrees and title, degrees and title in arts, and amending certain other acts) as part of the legal responsibility of the rector. It is part of a broader transformation of public HEIs into ‘complete organisations’ (Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson 2000), which often results in nothing but a façade. The analysis of strategic documents published by HEIs demonstrates that they tend to address contemporary institutional problems related to the financial situation or demographic trends. As a result, we found that the strategies tend to focus on short-term goals, extrapolating the current operational methods. Nonetheless, the institutional strategy can be considered the most fundamental document for HEIs, since it manifests their long-term goals, which are particularly critical for organisations characterised by a particularly decentralised governance structure, a high degree of self-governance and periodically changing leaders. The text analysis of the institutional strategies was performed with the help of thematic coding (Gibbs 2007), which helped us to focus on the identification of the main areas highlighted in the HEI strategies and the hierarchy as well as the importance of their priorities and goals. In addition, the examination of text helped to map major themes and problems to be explored in further investigation as such general account of

postgraduate education, institutional policy regarding postgraduate programmes and the perception of non-traditional students. The primary aim of this analysis was to define the priority assigned to the education of non-traditional students as well as to examine the significance of HEIs with respect to postgraduate studies.

The identified issues were operationalised and adequately notified in the interview protocols for both university management and academics. Such a methodological approach aimed to reveal the institutional strategy. Hence, the initial findings from the analysis of strategic documents and some of the interviews were instrumental in constructing the survey for post-graduate students. The interviews sometimes revealed unknown information that led to modification existing/and/or adding new questions to the survey.

Interviews

The third source of the empirical data derived for this project included individual in-depth interviews. The interviews with the representatives of the HEI management were principally intended to specify and verify the declared place and role of postgraduate education in institutional policy and practice. In addition, the interviewees were asked to provide examples of actual managerial decisions that would allow us to cross-check the role of postgraduate programmes in comparison to other institutional activities. The interview protocol covered the educational offer and teaching methods, as well as tools for evaluating their effects, selection of the teaching staff, and openness to students' needs. A total of 49 individual in-depth interviews (19 from private HEIs, 18 from public universities and 12 from UAS) were conducted with the management of the HEI (i.e. vice-rectors, chancellors and vice-chancellors), faculties (e.g. deans and vice-deans) and heads and lecturers of postgraduate studies. The in-depth interviews with the lecturers enabled us to provide insight into not only their experience but also their competencies, teaching methods, attitudes and models of relations with students. The empirical data collected during the interviews were analysed through thematic coding based on early findings during desk research.

It helped to reduce size of empirical material in order to focus only on categories and problems central for problem under study. In the interviews we sought information about viewpoints and attitudes towards postgraduate education, professional short-programmes and non-traditional students. The focus was to spot indications suggesting that HEIs recognise specific statues of postgraduate students and take into consideration their unique expectations. By doing so, we identified institutional steps (or lack of them) undertaken – in all levels of university governance – to plan, facilitate and cater this specific type of education.

For the purpose of the analysis, we triangulated the collected data, which helped us confront the official institutional communication with actual activities reconstructed based on the respondents' narratives. To the best of our knowledge, this was the most effective way to critically assess the actual actions taken by the management of all categories of institutions included in the study (Patton 1999). Furthermore, to have a broader context of the analysis, we used publicly available information published by GUS (Central Statistical Office) and the Ministry of Education and Science.

Research findings

The postgraduate education in institutional strategies across HE sector

The results of the investigation of all 11 institutional strategies indicate, rather counter-intuitively, that for HEIs, postgraduate education is not a high priority, regardless of the type, size and profile of the HEIs. In the examined documents, the postgraduate studies appeared to act as only a supplementary element to the core teaching, namely bachelor and master programmes. All HEIs considered in this study assigned a low priority to postgraduate education. For public HEIs, the low priority was due to their funding formula, which is overwhelmingly based on the number of regular students, whereas for the private sector, regular students generate higher and more stable revenues. However, the institutional strategic documents downplay postgraduate education as a new avenue for institutional development as well as a market niche. Perhaps, more time needs to elapse for the concept of LLL to evolve from a purely political project (Lisbon Strategy) to an established institutional practice in the higher education sector.

Despite downplaying postgraduate education, private institutions declare a strong focus on education as the most important goal and the (declared) student-centred approach, which is manifested in the care for the quality of services and student satisfaction. The latter is present at all levels of strategic management, i.e. vision, mission and goals of the organisation, as well as in the language in which they are formulated. Considering this, the absence of postgraduate education as a strategic area was even more surprising, especially given how private HEIs advertise their approach to education. Such institutions tend to favour an instrumental aspect of education, presenting it as leverage towards the professional success of their students, which is the strong position in the labour market ('the professional education of highly qualified staff in accordance with the needs of the developing economy of the country and the uniting Europe', NPU-3; 'education of socially responsible professionals, competitive in the national and international labour markets', NPU-4; 'career development partners', NPU-1). Furthermore, UAS

emphasise a utilitarian aspect of education and underline links with employers, which helps them to constantly adapt their educational offer to the market needs:

‘Teaching is conducted in programs that give a good chance to get a job or start your own business, and also provides opportunities for continuing education for all those interested in improving their professional skills’. (UAS-1)

Both private HEIs and UAS present themselves as institutes that offer education, which would help find attractive jobs following graduation. Hence, the lack of reference in institutional strategies is inconsistent with this notion. Preparing learners for the labour market requires systematic knowledge updating and skill improvement, which can be undoubtedly delivered by postgraduate programmes. Furthermore, the institutional strategy of public universities ignores the issue of postgraduate education. Unsurprisingly, they are largely embedded in history and thus demonstrate multiple historical references. Public universities are primarily focused on academic tradition and institutional reputation; therefore, their priority is high-quality scientific research, attractive study programmes for international students and a stable economic situation. Overall, the institutional strategy of public universities can be considered more than a mere tool for strategic management. One of the universities included in this study names its strategy the ‘account of the academic community’s ambitions’ (U-2), which appears to be the best description of the character and significance of the strategies employed at public universities. These universities make strong and frequent references to traditional academic values, such as the pursuit of truth, integrity, trust within the academic community and tolerance.

Although private HEIs and UAS seem to be externally oriented to meet the needs of students, public universities are internally oriented and focused on the needs and ambitions of academics. Research activity is prioritised with an emphasis on ‘building research excellence’ (U-1), ‘freedom in the pursuit of truth and expression of views’ (U-2) and ‘making a lasting contribution to the scientific understanding of the world and solving major contemporary problems’ (U-3). For public universities, education is more of a philosophical rather than an instrumental concept. It is defined as the process of shaping students’ minds and souls rather than the development of competencies. These universities believe that education is about not only preparing young people for work but also raising aware and responsible citizens.

The strategy in action – the perspective of management and staff

Despite the low emphasis on postgraduate education, all HEIs included in this study offered postgraduate programmes. This proved earlier findings that strategic institutional documents and institutional policy represent two opposite realities. Hence, the next step of the study was to reconstruct the strategy ‘in action’. Following Fumasoli and Lepori (2011, 4), it was defined as ‘a pattern of decisions and actions subordinated to the achievement of goals important for the organisation, while these decisions and actions constitute a coherent sequence spread over time and covering important areas of the university’s activity’ This pattern must be recognised and shared by members of the organisation as a form of collective pursuit of goals. The rationalisation of this pattern does not need to precede the decision-making process or actions and may occur during or after a decision has been made, particularly when they can be seen from a broader perspective (Fumasoli and Lepori 2011).

Business opportunity for private HEIs

Interviews with the representatives of the private HEIs indicated the student-centred culture regarding postgraduate education. The educational offer, along with the accompanying services such as the organisation of childcare for students, is developed and monitored with respect to students. It is largely dependent on their interest (demand-oriented approach) rather than the preferences of the academic staff (supply-oriented approach). The unpopular programmes are removed from the offer and replaced with new programmes to cover the market niches thus far unclaimed by competitors. Private HEIs also engage postgraduate students through active teaching methods. We found several examples that demonstrated students being treated as equal partners in the constantly updated educational process to match their expectations regarding the content, choice of lecturers and teaching methods.

People want to have fun in class. When there are games and some group exercises, it is easier to endure eight hours in class than when there are lectures that you have to listen to. [...] At the moment, many classes are workshops or, skill training sessions on communication, negotiations, interviews and assessment interviews. It is very popular. [I_40]

Private HEIs have developed effective mechanisms (e.g. dedicated elements of the structure and organisational culture) with the intention to secure the interests of students. Their student-oriented approach manifests itself through not only regular student satisfaction surveys that consider students’ expectations but also the general care of students, most of whom are adults with specific needs and expectations. Private HEIs recognise the unique

status of adult learners through special administrative arrangements and the provision of services facilitating the balance between (mostly weekend) studies and family obligations.

Postgraduate and first-cycle studies involve considerable competition – the offer must be extensive and students must be satisfied. In fact, next students show up if the current ones, who are about to graduate, are satisfied. They attract the most people to postgraduate studies. [I_34]

While ranking low in the private institutional strategies, postgraduate studies emerge as a significant area of performance from the interviews. Private HEIs treat postgraduate studies as an opportunity to diversify their income and improve their financial stability. It appears instrumental to reduce overreliance on a single group of full-time students. This is imperative in the face of the already noticeable and expected decline in the number of regular students. The interviews provide compounding evidence that the management of private HEIs demonstrates a good understanding of changing the educational market. These changes are also perceived as a catalyst of business opportunities and a source of revenues for both institutions and staff. The private HEIs exemplify the model of the entrepreneurial university (Clark 1998), which, in the face of the demographic decline, must find ways to compensate for the decreasing number of students. It also motivates staff to actively search for niches in the postgraduate studies market.

After I became assistant professor, I realised that my salary didn't reflect the market conditions. I went to my boss and asked for a raise. He replied: 'Listen, I don't have the money, but if you want to earn more, you can start a postgraduate degree programme.' This is how employees are rewarded at our university for showing initiative. Postgraduate studies are certainly treated by employees as a way to earn more money. [I_42]

Actions taken by private HEIs aim to ensure financial efficiency and cost optimisation through outsourcing risks and resources. By cooperating with external partners (i.e. professional associations), the management of private HEIs can rapidly develop their offer with the minimum involvement of their resources. In the context of the resource dependence theory, such strategies of private HEIs appear to emerge from their strong dependence on thousands of small private sources of income, whose accumulation provides for a stream of funding. Therefore, the expansion of the postgraduate studies offered is a form of compensation for the declining income from regular (MA and BA) studies.

The primary purpose of launching the postgraduate studies was to keep our graduates with us. We offered the first-cycle study programmes for many years and wanted to retain our students, but we didn't have the accreditation for MA studies. By developing the fields of study that complemented and broadened our students' education, we wanted to prolong their education at our university. [I_36]

The strategies of private HEIs differ strongly from those of public universities, which rely on resources generated from the educational market to a much lesser extent. The interviews show quite clearly that public universities are far more financially stable despite the awareness of the growing role of non-traditional students. However, this awareness seems to be considerably higher among the academic staff involved in postgraduate studies than among the university management. The nature of governance of public universities with decentralised authority puts the burden of postgraduate studies organisation and management on the academic staff (Donina and Jaworska 2022). The staff who take the initiative, design the curriculum of the studies, oversee the quality of education and care for its practical aspects, as well as develop attractive methods of teaching and build relationships with postgraduate students. Hence, postgraduate studies can be largely considered the domain of the initiative of individual academic staff at public universities, whose institutional leaders depict little interest in them. It is because they perceive postgraduate education as a form of vocational training rather than part of an academic mission.

Limited resources in universities of applied science

The interviews with the leaders of UAS (analogously to private HEIs) demonstrate that an instrumental approach to education is one of their major characteristics. UAS are relatively new institutions established over the last two decades to provide non-fee education to those living outside large cities with low economic and cultural capital. UAS were established to provide higher education to those with limited access. Therefore, they need to be close to the needs of the economy and educate people regarding the local labour market. The postgraduate education fits well with the regional mission of UAS (Anielska 2022), and our study shows that the interviewed academic staff recognise the specific needs and exceptional status of non-traditional students. However, the leaders of UAS openly admitted that attracting postgraduate students is not their priority.

The non-traditional student is also very important to us, but he does not determine whether the university of applied sciences functions. The university would not be able to support itself with postgraduate studies. It subsists on what its full-time studies provide. [I_2]

From an economic point of view, regular students are a critical resource for public universities, and postgraduates play a minor role. In addition, the interviewees from UAS pointed out two additional factors. In Poland, UAS are located in small and less economically developed cities, which places a huge constraint on the demand for postgraduate programmes as little money is available in the local market. Moreover, UAS are relatively small

organisations with limited (human and financial) capacity to provide such programmes with their resources. Therefore, unless a clear demand for certain professional programmes is determined, UAS reluctantly take financial and manpower risk to establish, advertise and enrol postgraduate students. Many public institutions are risk-averse and would prefer to open new programmes for bachelor students rather than postgraduate students.

Second-best postgraduate education in public universities

Both private HEIs and UAS vary from public universities regarding institutional approaches to postgraduate education. It is not entirely clear whether university management, (autonomous) faculties or small units are responsible for the organisation of postgraduate programmes. This study investigated three big public universities that depicted similar problems: the postgraduate programmes in such universities were predominately bottom-up initiatives that emerged from an individual or a group. The groups of initiators ultimately become responsible for running them. This model can be successful in the short run; however, it falls short to provide the foundation for sustainable and long-term development. In other words, managerial practices derived from the private sector are implemented by public universities; however, these practices are occurring on a small scale within small units by individuals or a group of academics. Therefore, the development of postgraduate programmes is not driven by institutional policy but by opportunity-seeking individual academics. The decentralisation of responsibility and power for the organisation of postgraduate studies at public universities also presents several consequences. The academics involved are also the major (internal) beneficiaries of postgraduate programmes, and financial bonuses are a major reason for their involvement. It places a great focus on short-term financial gains, which impairs a more strategic institutional investment. This implies that the postgraduate programmes in public universities are largely bottom-up initiatives as academic staff possess full discretion and responsibility for ‘their’ programmes.

This is the only chance for assistant professors at postgraduate studies to show initiative and prove they have ideas, can organise people and talk to the rectorate and the financial department. It is a managerial function for those who aren’t heads of any part of the university structure yet. As a result, I can pick those who want to do something and can do it. [I_14]

The interviewees involved in postgraduate education highlighted the lack of interest from public university management. This translates into the university’s insufficient commitment and flexibility in terms of procedures (e.g. financial), long decision-making processes, unclear responsibility and the

preference of academic staff interests over those of the potential candidates, such as those in in-house recruitment.

The university's margin is 30% of the revenue. Nobody is willing to reduce this amount for a new group to start. A simple decision could change that. The university could take 20%. [...] The choice is to either earn nothing or get 20%. It is worth reaching out for it because chances are that the new group will kick off. [I_13]

Unsurprisingly, academic staff involved in postgraduate programmes highlight the conservatism of public universities as an obstacle to developing postgraduate programmes. Public universities are risk-averse organisations. While forming numerous comparisons, they specifically acknowledge that private organisations are more active and agile while responding to emerging opportunities. The academic staff seem to understand that in such a dynamic market, institutional steadfastness together with a cumbersome decision-making process, inevitably carries the risk of ignoring the needs of the students.

At our university it takes a long time to launch a new study programme. This is why we make the effort to ensure that the idea is good and looks promising in terms of attracting candidates and succeeding. In contrast, if we have a good idea at WSB, we don't think about candidates but prepare an offer. [...] If a large enough group of candidates is collected, the specialisation is launched. Otherwise it isn't. [I_18]

Academics are aware of the evolving educational needs at public universities. However, without adequate institutional support, their actions resemble 'incomplete' or 'fragmented' entrepreneurship. This is sufficient in the short run; however, in the long run, the institute may fail. These obstacles may not only make competing with other institutions on the market challenging but can also effectively sabotage bottom-up initiatives. After a series of interviews, it was difficult to agree whether this lack of commitment to the management of public universities is the cause or the result of seeing postgraduate studies as a form of **private business at a public university**. It appears that public universities do not use their great internal capacity to generate resources from postgraduate studies; rather, the postgraduate studies generate a relatively small, additional income, or other benefits, for those directly engaged in.

The organisation of postgraduate study programmes at public universities reveals tensions related to the hierarchy of the university's strategic priorities. It highlights the difference between the strategic resources of the university as an organisation and its academic and administrative staff. The international publications outlet is an openly manifested priority of any public university since it generates institutional prestige as a strategic resource. As a result, research takes precedence over other areas of activity that automatically rank lower in this hierarchy. For universities, prestige and international visibility

remain the priority to earn a high reputation. Furthermore, the research performance measured by high-impactful publications impacts the amount of funding obtained from the state. Teaching appears to be less important for several public universities; however, the number of regular students is critical since it directly impacts the funding formula of public block grants.

Discussion and conclusion

The study provides evidence that Polish HEIs, both public and private, rarely recognise postgraduate studies as a priority area. It is a highly unexpected finding, since we initially assumed that both the political and economic prominence of LLL, as well as business opportunity for HEIs, would put postgraduate education at the centre of institutional development.

It is perhaps early to expect postgraduate studies to become a strategic goal for HEIs. On the other hand, the Lisbon Strategy was declared more than two decades ago. Private HEIs – which almost entirely rely on tuition fees – proved to be more determined to explore the opportunities offered by postgraduate education. It is largely due to a declining number of students and fee revenues that private HEIs are searching for new types of students. Given the demographic decline, postgraduate students have become a key resource for the private sector to survive in the market, even if it implies a shift from academic education to a more vocational or even training-based profile. The lack of financial resources causes them to re-focus their profile and attract students from around the world. The desperate need for resources and their entrepreneurial nature urge them to seek alternatives ensuring their short-term survival and long-term growth. Such institutions consider this as a different type of business; therefore, although their strategic documents hardly contain any direct references to lifelong learning, non-traditional students, or postgraduate studies, private HEIs play a dominant role in the postgraduate studies market.

On the other hand, public universities demonstrate a radically varied approach to the postgraduate sector of education. They are almost entirely funded from the public purse through a complex funding formula, which is largely input-driven. For public universities, the key resources include institutional prestige, international visibility and regular postgraduate students, since it provides them with the highly desired status of a ‘research university’. Public universities do not need to run after students and provide new services that are rarely related to their core academic mission. This is demonstrated in their strategic documents, implying that postgraduate education (training) is not a priority. Institutional prestige is not only important in the academic community, but it also indirectly translates into the amount of

funding acquired through transnational competitive mechanisms (ERC, Horizon Europe) and national excellence framework. However, they still provide postgraduate programmes as a result of bottom-up initiatives of academic staff.

UAS appear to fit in between these two strategies. They do not chase non-traditional students to keep their books in balance but recognise their educational profile and acknowledge service to society. Due to their small size and the lack of Humboldtian tradition, they are considered more centralised organisations that can generate postgraduate programmes. However, as they are public institutions with limited financial flexibility, they are also less likely to outsource staff to teach specifically postgraduate students. Public universities already have such staff and private HEIs can easily acquire staff from the market, but UAS struggle to find their way. Nevertheless, they increasingly expand their postgraduate offer by providing vocational training to those in need, distinguishing them from public universities.

It was noticed that postgraduate students, as resources, are not equally important for all types of HEIs. For private institutions, they are regular students, even if they are studying part-time. Such students are less financially attractive because of their short-term commitment; however, they bring cash. A similar approach was identified in UAS, albeit they have limited capacity to address growing demands for postgraduate education. It contrasts with the approach demonstrated by public universities, which see postgraduate studies as a form of vocational training that does not always correspond well with their academic status, tradition and prestige. Public universities tend to value institutional prestige over financial resources derived from the market. As a result, postgraduate studies at public universities are more frequently developed by groups of employees who see their interest in it, rather than the university authorities, for whom it is only an additional activity.

In summary, the analysis of the institutional approach to postgraduate studies can lead to two major conclusions. First, the hierarchy of resources determines the institutional policy of HEIs and explains the various levels of institutional involvement in the development of postgraduate studies, providing the reason behind private HEIs being the most active and effective on the market of postgraduate education followed by UAS. Second, the entrepreneurial culture has helped private HEIs to use the emerging opportunity and become an undisputable champion of postgraduate education, while public universities remain relatively passive in this field, allowing individual academics to do their business. It remains to be seen whether public universities can sustain such policy by reducing the number of students as well as acquiring

limited public funding and calls for public higher education to engage in building the post-industrial economy.

Note

1. The data comes from POLON (*The Integrated System of Information on Science and Higher Education*) and offers public data about science and higher education <https://polon.nauka.gov.pl/siec-polon>

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