

The Long Shadow of Doctoral Candidate Status. Case Study - Poland

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1 Introduction

Often presented as a European “green island” on the map of the recent economic crisis, Poland has for more than 20 years been undergoing a structural crisis caused by the neoliberal restructuring of the state and economy, as well as an overall attack on labour (Kowalik 2012; Tittenbrun 2007). The higher education system is a prominent part of this picture and shares all its general problems. After the transition began in 1989, the higher education sector, subsequently granting formal academic freedom to academics and institutional autonomy to institutions by the Law of 1990, was in general left on its own by policymakers¹, with no major governmental long-term restructuring strategies and reforms, and with a powerful policy imperative only towards increasing access to higher education (Antonowicz 2012; Kwiek 2012a). By 2005, with the introduction of fee-based part-time programmes in the formal public sector and growing expansion of the newly established private non-profit sector, massification through commercialization reached this goal and the system entered the stage of universal access (Trow 2010). In the times of general neoliberal austerity connected with slowly decreasing levels of public funding for higher education and science, formal non-profit public universities instituted a great source of non-core revenue: mass tuition-based teaching. The rise of this embryonic form of university entrepreneurialism marks a turning point in employment relations at the university (Kwiek 2012b), as well as of the growth of importance of unpaid or low-paid teaching delivered by doctoral candidates for the book-keeping balance of Polish public universities (especially in the fields of the humanities, social sciences, law and economics).

Though doctoral programmes in Europe have been treated as a part of the Bologna Process (third cycle studies) since the Berlin Conference in 2003 there is still no European-wide regulation of a doctoral candidate’s status; however, in many European countries national regulations give them the status of students. In many countries a doctoral candidate is someone who can be put to work but does not have any labour rights or other privileges due to them. Poland is not an exception here. However, as claimed in this paper, due to the structural conditions and teaching-orientation of the Polish higher education system as a whole, this ambiguous status has far-reaching consequences for the capabilities of doctoral candidates and makes them socially vulnerable.

¹ Despite the ongoing transformation of the political and socio-economic reality in Poland, since 1990 the higher education sector was left alone by the policymakers for nearly 15 years. In 2005 the new Law on Higher Education was meant to adapt the system as a whole to the requirements of the Bologna Process, as well as towards integration with the European Higher Education Area and European Research Area. The more recent wave of reforms that started in 2008 and have lasted continuously until now aims at the reinstitutionalization of the research mission and orientation of Polish universities.

The purpose of this paper is to show how the vague legal status of doctoral candidates affects their work-study/research-life balance, and how they organize against their precarious condition, as well as what the limitations of their informal resistance are. The presentation is based on a case study built on 13 open-ended semi-structured interviews conducted among doctoral candidates at one of the highly teaching-oriented faculties of social sciences in the North of Poland. The paper provides background information on the context and dynamics of the Polish higher education systems with regards to doctoral education, as well as indicating the methodology for understanding capabilities deprivation used in this study.

2 Semi-peripheral specificity of the Polish higher education system

Over the last few decades, higher education all over the globe – especially in Europe – has undergone a paradigmatic transformation (see: Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley 2009; Kwiek 2013). These changes are often categorized under different labels such as: the rise of the production of knowledge in “Mode 2” (Gibbons et al. 1994); “the second academic revolution” (Etzkowitz 2002, 9–19); the rise of the “entrepreneurial university” (Clark 1998; Leslie and Slaughter 1997); “the growing complexity of academic enterprise” (Kwiek 2012c); and the results of adapting worldwide higher education systems into the stage of universal access (Trow 2010). Universities globally are getting more and more attention, both from students, policymakers, businesses and local communities. They deserve it, because they have a greater numbers of students than ever before, they employ more and more faculty, they play crucial roles in the economic development of regions and the cities they are located in and they cooperate closely with national and transnational industries. The shift in European public universities towards income diversification is clear, according to various empirical studies (see: B Jongbloed et al. 2010; Ben Jongbloed and de Boer 2012). The entrepreneurial-oriented public university is a fact and it is more and more used as a template in the development and implementation of reforms that are trying to turn the “university into an engine of the knowledge economy” all over the world (Berman 2012). However, in the corpus of main policy documents in Europe and the literature on higher education systems, there is still relatively little emphasis on the persisting division between Western and Central-Eastern Europe, between the centre and the peripheries (Kwiek and Maassen 2012).

Out of many differences between Western and Central-Eastern European higher education systems, two are of the greatest importance for understanding the specificity of doctoral education in Poland, as well as the reason why Polish doctoral candidates in certain fields could be perceived as vulnerable and precarious. First, the levels of research funding are relatively low in comparison not only with Western European economies, but also countries in the region². Second, continuing institutional focus on teaching-related revenues (both from public, as well as private sources), have a powerfully negative impact on knowledge production in Poland (Kwiek 2013). And a low level of innovative knowledge production at the university means a low level of research activity integration in the processes of educating PhD candidates.

Another distinctive feature is the specific mode of massification that higher education in Poland has undergone. The massification that started after 1989 came together with the neoliberal capitalist transformation of the 1990’s and was closely linked to it, producing

² Polish gross domestic expenditure on research and development as a share of GDP (2012 – 0.9%) is relatively low when compared with the EU-27 average (2.08 %) as well as with the two main economies in the region: the Czech Republic (1.88%) and Hungary (1.3%). Data source: GERP Eurostat.

disposable subjects for the emerging service economy. Following 1989, reformers during the transformation period basically did not mean to reform higher education system at all. Other public services were viewed as substantially more interesting and important. There is even a brief mention of Leszek Balcerowicz (the founding father of Polish neoliberal reform agenda) speaking at one of the government's seminars that Cultural and Higher education sectors "have to make a living on their own" (Nowak 2010). In general, it was a "policy of no policy" combined with a strong belief (common at that time) that the market would do its job. And the market really did. Together with the introduction of fee-based part-time programmes in the formal public sector, massification through the commercialization of access to higher education achieved its goal. The phenomenal growth of the profit-driven, although nominally non-profit, private sector, with 330 institutions, nearly 30% enrolment, 580,000 students in 2010, and the highest rate of private provider participation in the higher education sector in Europe – comparable only with Portugal – contributed to widening access to higher education. It has to be mentioned that nearly 60% of the student population these days pays for their education (both in public and private institutions). During the first 15 years of neoliberal transformation, the overall number of students rose from about 400,000 in 1990 up to nearly 2 million in 2005. Gross enrolment rates among the population aged between 19 and 25 reached 54% in 2010 – higher education became a mass or even universal experience. System expansion stopped around 2005 and enrolments contracted from around 2 million to about 1.8 million. This contraction continues and is expected to last until at least 2025³. Therefore, it is obvious that in the years to come Polish higher education has to expect a period of rapid and deep change caused by both objective (demographics) and subjective (political reforms) factors. In this paper we will focus on the consequences of the previous period's policies and related structural conditions, that is, teaching-oriented and revenue-driven institutional strategies, regarding the well-being of the doctoral candidates enrolled in higher education institutions. However, at first we should characterize the specificity of doctoral education in Poland.

3 Doctoral education in Poland

Two models of doctoral training coexist in Poland. During the period of real socialism, doctoral studies were perceived as a form of education supplementary to the assistantship model. Assistants underwent training while being employed full-time in higher education institutions, teaching students (usually between 180-240 hours annually) and conducting academic research. They had 8 years to finish and defend their thesis. As in Germany, the Polish doctorate was, and still is, treated as the first out of two steps toward full academic independence. The second step is "habilitation".

In general, doctoral studies last four years. They are available in all disciplines. The typical period of completion of a PhD is around 4-5 years (that is the time for a full studies programme, usually extended by between 6 months and one year); however, there is an uncertainty because official statistical data refers only to the period of completion following the opening of the doctorate procedure (that is the registration and presentation of the thesis' title and research proposal in front of a given institution's council). Doctoral candidates usually undergo the procedure during the second or third year of their studies (Kwiek and Juchacz 2007, 77–78). However, for the reasons discussed below, many candidates do not even reach the moment of registration and opening because they drop out of the programme.

³ This contraction is due to purely demographic reasons and the shrinking youth population in the country. Enrolments are expected to fall from about 1.95 million students in 2005 to about 1.2 million students in 2025.

Recently, Polish doctoral programmes have kept a gender balance, with slight female ascendancy (52.4% of the total number of doctoral candidates) in the academic year 2011/2012⁴. The majority of candidates begin their doctoral studies just after graduation (at the age of 24) and the typical age range of doctoral candidates is 24-30 years old⁵. Admission criteria and procedures differ according to the institution. Some have highly competitive examinations, while other institutions admit nearly all the candidates that apply for the programme. Doctoral candidates in Poland are perceived as a group located between students and junior academics (Kwiek 2004, 121). Formally, they have the status of students with some (but not all) benefits, as well as the obligations of academic employees. At national level they are represented by the *Krajowa Reprezentacja Doktorantów* (Doctoral Candidates' National Representative), constituted through elections by representatives of local universities' doctoral councils and formed out of faculty representatives. This organization, like local doctoral councils, has no legitimacy regarding collective bargaining at an institutional level and no real say in terms of the doctoral candidates' working conditions. Doctoral candidates cannot join or form regular trade unions either.

Despite the great expansion in doctoral programme enrolments at Polish universities, that went hand in hand with the process of massification of the system of higher education as a whole, doctoral education as well as the working and studying conditions of doctoral candidates are still significantly under-researched topics. The main, but tenuous, quantitative data comes from the annual reports of the Polish Central Statistical Office: *Higher Education Institutions and their Finances*⁶. The reports cover all the basic information in accordance with the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED'97). The literature on doctoral candidates in Poland is rather small in size and fragmented. However, there are basic studies sorting out the statistical data on doctoral programmes in the light of current policy regulations (Kwiek 2004, Kwiek and Juchacz 2008). Furthermore, Kraśniewski (2008) has recently drawn attention to the problems and challenges of doctoral training through a case study method of the doctoral programme at the Faculty of Electronics and Information Technology at Warsaw University of Technology. Preliminary empirical work on employment prospects and expectations, as well as on the training conditions of PhD candidates was undertaken by Dąbrowa-Szefler and Sztabiński (Dąbrowa-Szefler and Sztabiński 2008)⁷; however, the research was limited only to five Warsaw public universities. In these studies the status of doctoral candidates in Poland is stressed as fragile, vague and

⁴ With visible variations across institution types: Universities (56.5%), Technical universities (37.5%), Agricultural academies (62.4%), Academies of economics (48.3%), Higher teacher education schools (62.7%), Medical universities (67.5%), Physical academies (58.9%), Fine arts academies (55.4%), Theological academies (29.4%), Academies of the Ministry of National Defence (25.5%) (GUS 2012, 293).

⁵ The Central Statistical Office stopped collecting information on the age of recipients of PhD diplomas in 2004. In 2003 the age structure of new PhD holders (total: 5,460) was as follows: under 27: 70 (1.3%), 27–30: 2,035 (37.3%), 31–35: 1,866 (34.2%), 36–40: 702 (12.8%), 41–45: 381 (7.0%), 46–50: 218 (4.0%), over 50: 188 (3.4%). (GUS 2005)

⁶ This part of the paper draws on data from the Central Statistical Reports for the period 1990-2011/2012. It is important to stress that despite the fact that the national doctoral candidates' representative organization (*Krajowa Reprezentacja Doktorantów – Doctoral Candidates' National Representative* <http://www.krd.ogicom.pl>) is part of the European EURODOC network, Poland did not participate in the EURODOC survey due to that fact it still lacks even superficial insight into aspects of doctoral candidates lives such as: funding, academic work, academic publishing, mobility, career paths, training and supervision as well as working conditions.

⁷ See also the previous works on PhD education by these scholars, Dąbrowa-Szefler (2002) and Sztabiński (2002).

substantially affecting their lives and career prospects. Some scholars, like Tomasz Szkudlarek, reflecting on the situation of Polish doctoral candidates in the humanities take a step forward, emphasising that their situation brings to mind Marx's industrial "reserve army of the unemployed that serves the needs of the labour market. The crowds of doctoral students at the gates of the academe form a reservoir of low-paid or unpaid teaching and technical work; they also lower the wage pressure from those employed full time." (Szkudlarek 2010, 361). Moreover, they could essentially reduce the bargaining power of full-time faculty, and their position could be fashioned by a given institution so as to become structurally antagonistic (despite the will of both sides) to the junior full-time faculty. However, as Andrea Fumagalli observed⁸, we should no longer use this old Marxian figure in its classical topological understanding. Fumagalli defines the new industrial reserve army of precarious workers as those that are not outside the labour market anymore (in the case of doctoral candidates – institutional labour market), but directly inside it. It is a disposable population that could be put to work if needed or have it withdrawn from them at any time and at a very low cost. If for Marx, the industrial reserve army was functional for capital in the process of lowering the wage pressure of those workers included in the wage labour system, doctoral candidates seen through the lenses of Fumagalli's topological figure of the precariat, play an important role in the internal institutional labour market, being themselves a highly disposable and cheap source of labour power. The following paragraphs in this section serve to illustrate the empirical background that lies behind the process of creating disposable populations out of doctoral candidates in Polish higher education institutions.

3.1 Stipends, teaching and working conditions

Doctoral candidates are arguably the most vulnerable part of the higher education system workforce and, at the same time, one that is of crucial importance to its reproduction. In the 2011/2012 academic year there were 40,263 doctoral candidates, and only 32.1% of them received any stable funding in the form of a doctoral stipend (GUS 2012, 281). However, only full-time candidates, mainly from public institutions, are allowed to receive it, so in real terms the percentage of recipients is a little bit higher and reaches 46%⁹ (See Chart 1). The financial amount of the stipend varies slightly according to university. Scholarships are granted to doctoral candidates after the enrolment procedure according to their position in the final ranking. Usually they are distributed on a competitive basis. They can be cancelled or prolonged after each year of studies or granted for the full four years of studies. The average is around 285 €, nevertheless it cannot be less than 60% of minimal assistant wage, which is 414 €.

Additionally, there are various forms of material support for doctoral candidates: a) a maintenance grant; b) an assistance payment; c) a stipend for the best PhD candidates; d) a special grant for disabled persons; e) a stipend from the Minister of Science and Higher Education for distinguished achievements. With the new *Law of Higher Education* introduced in March 2011, we can observe a policy shift in the preferred forms of distribution of material

⁸ I am grateful for valuable comments that he made as a participant during the EDUWEL Valencia conference.

⁹ During the period 2004/2005-2011/2012 the proportion of recipients of PhD stipends among full-time candidates from public higher education institutions decreased along with the increase in their numbers. In 2004 it was 57.2%, in 2005 – 53.7%, in 2006 – 54.6%, in 2007 – 57.1%, in 2008 – 52.7%, in 2009 – 48.3%, in 2010 – 47.9%, and in 2011 – 46%. In real terms the number of stipends increased during that period by 802; however, the proportion of doctoral candidates that had to continue their work without stipends increased by 11.2%. (GUS 2005; GUS 2006; GUS 2007; GUS 2008; GUS 2009; GUS 2010; GUS 2011; GUS 2012)

support from those aimed at social needs (withdrawal meals grants and accommodation grants) to more merit- and competition-based forms.

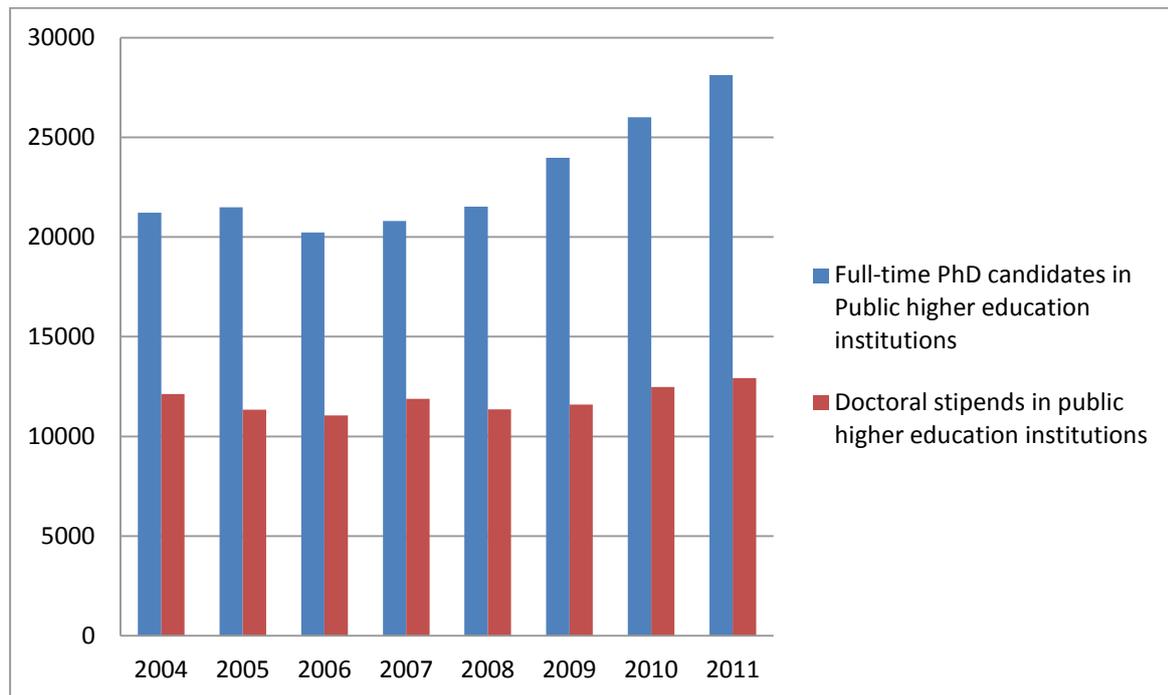


Chart 1: Doctoral stipends for full-time doctoral candidates at public universities (GUS 2005; GUS 2006; GUS 2007; GUS 2008; GUS 2009; GUS 2010; GUS 2011; GUS 2012)

Doctoral students with stipends are obliged to teach up to 90 hours per annum as a form of training (called “praktyka dydaktyczna” – “unpaid teaching internship”). Candidates without scholarships as well as those studying part-time, according to new regulations, are no longer (since the regulations of the Law of March 2011 came into force) able to refuse a “teaching internship” under threat of being removed from the programme. At the level of each higher education institution, there are individual regulations for this teaching load (in some cases doctoral candidates from part-time fee-based courses are obliged to teach up to 30 hours per annum). There are a few paradoxes here. First, this “internship” usually has no professional supervision (doctoral candidates are left in the classroom on their own) and candidates who have pedagogical qualifications and classroom experience (gained in other higher education institutions or at secondary schools) are not released from this duty. Moreover, in many cases, especially in large teaching-oriented humanities departments, doctoral candidates in fee-based part-time tracks¹⁰ or those without stipends are encouraged to take up more teaching hours than suggested by the limit.

In comparison, according to the *Law on Higher Education* from March 2011 (and each institution adapts its own requirements to this regulation), academics who also carry out research are obliged to teach between 120 and 240 hours per annum (usually junior faculty, with assistants included, teach up to 210 h, and senior faculty up to 180 h). The rector of the institution can reduce the teaching obligation of individual academics due to his or her involvement in research projects and other statutory activities. It may seem that the extent of the teaching load for doctoral candidates in Poland, when compared to that of regular faculty

¹⁰ Among others, this is supported by the evidence from our field research.

(or even to other countries), is nothing exceptional; however, as we will see in the following sections, when it is connected with very low or even zero remuneration it might be seen as a source of negative effects.

3.2 Massification of PhD studies

The Polish system has grown rapidly, and over the course of twenty two years has increased the number of PhD candidates nearly fifteen times since the beginning of transformation in 1989. In 1990/1991 the number of PhD candidates was 2695 and for a very short period, until 1995/1996, it increased nearly four times to 10482 and continued to grow. In 2008, scholars predicted this rapid growth might have to come to an end (Kraśniewski 2008: 127) because in 2006 and 2007 we observed a slight decline in enrolments. However, it was a temporary slowdown and, starting from the academic year 2008/2009, growth went back to its previous dynamics, reaching the number of 40263 doctoral candidates in 2011/2012. A full picture of this growth dynamic is included in Chart 2.

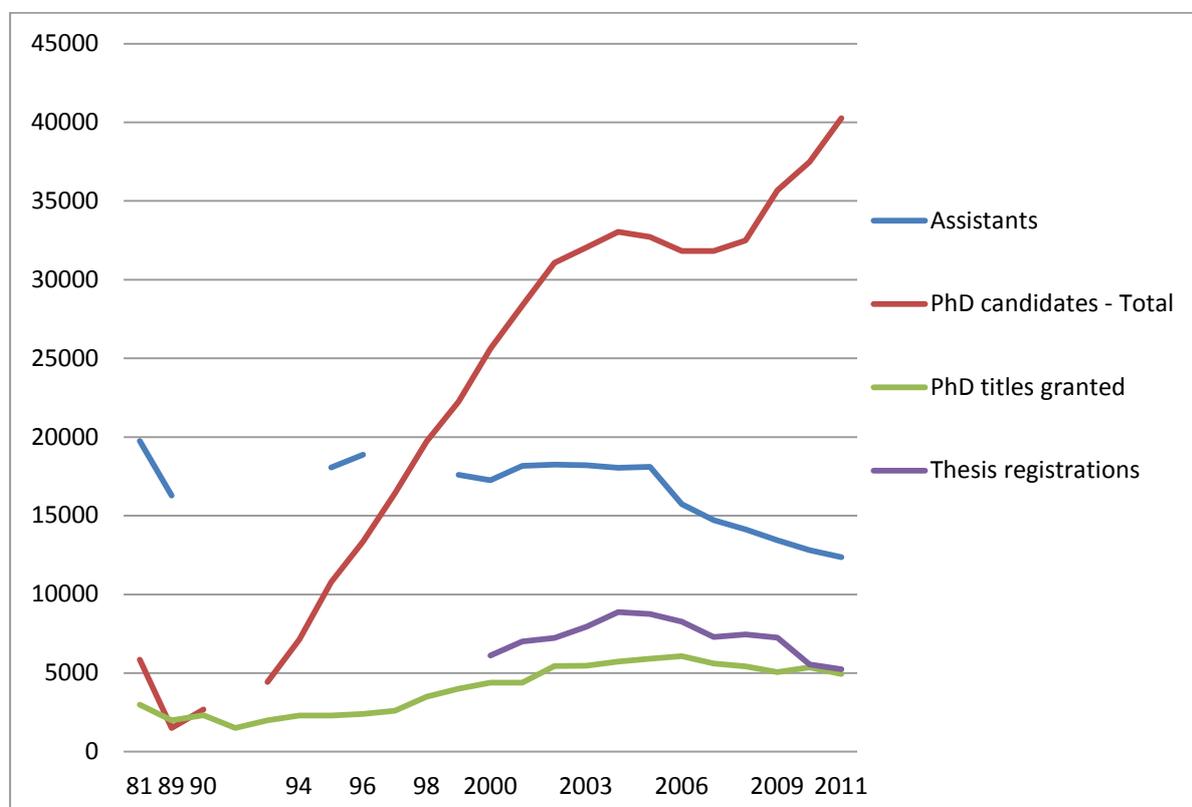


Chart 2: Number of PhD candidates, assistants and PhD productivity (GUS 2005; GUS 2006; GUS 2007; GUS 2008; GUS 2009; GUS 2010; GUS 2011; GUS 2012)

The academic year 1998/1999 is here perceived as a threshold. For the first time, PhD candidates outnumbered assistants. The authors of *Diagnosis of Polish Higher Education System* suggest that the substantial decrease in the number of assistant's positions (by 35% between 1996/1997 and 2011/2012 – see Chart 2) was related to the change in the formulas for calculating operational grants from the Ministry of Science and Higher Education for public higher education institutions that took place in 1994. Large numbers of assistants have not been taken into account in these calculations anymore. Dąbrowa-Szeffler and Sztabiński (2008) suggest that this phenomenon was closely connected with the general increase in enrolment rates in doctoral programmes that remained included in the basis for the calculation

of public funding for institutions. From the point of view of Polish public higher education institutions in the humanities, doctoral candidates are a perfect and valuable resource – easy to enrol, easy to control and available for work if needed.

In terms of output, the strong increase in the number of PhD candidates has not lead to a comparable increase in completion rates during the period of 1990-2011/12 (see Chart 2). A falling proportional rate of thesis registrations is being observed, and since 2006 a falling number of PhD titles awarded. There is also an observable slowdown in the time PhD candidates need for finishing and defending their thesis (a trend reflected in Chart 3).

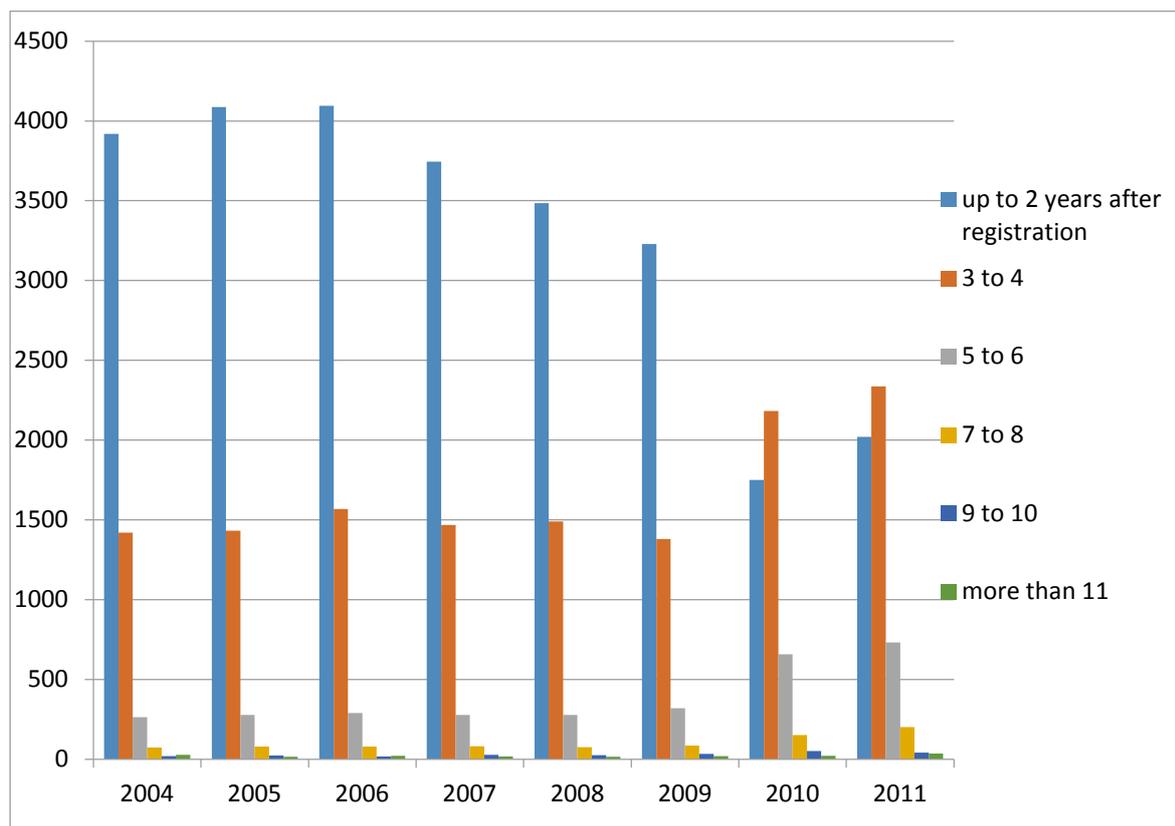


Chart 3: PhD titles granted by length of time starting from thesis registration (GUS 2005; GUS 2006; GUS 2007; GUS 2008; GUS 2009; GUS 2010; GUS 2011; GUS 2012)

3.3 Living conditions

The level of the doctoral stipend has to be put in context. The minimum wage in Poland in 2013 was around 400 €, and the average monthly rent for a bachelor flat in an academic city (except for Warsaw, where the price could be much higher) is around 260 €. The average monthly price for a room, with a separate bathroom, in a student dorm in an academic city (except for Warsaw) amounts to 150 €. The median gross income in 2013 in Poland was 935 €. A basic doctoral stipend was around 290 €, which is 31% of the country’s median gross income.

Income poverty is not the only, but one of the most important, sources of vulnerability. According to the UN Report *Rethinking Poverty*, in developed countries like those in the EU and OECD, the poverty threshold is defined as 40, 50 or 60 per cent of a country’s median gross income. Doctoral candidates who rely on their stipends only fall into the category of

working poor. According to Sen, understanding poverty only in terms of low income makes no sense. At the same time he claims that “*relative* deprivation in terms of *incomes* can yield *absolute* deprivation in terms of *capabilities*” (1999: 89). Income poverty suffered in a rich country can also be an important source of capability deprivation (Bourdieu et al. 1999). Income and other forms of well-being cannot really be disconnected, at least in European contexts.

The major problem for Polish PhD candidates, indicated in various studies, is the situation when they have to get a regular job along with their PhD training. In the majority of cases, PhD candidates are forced to find a supplementary job to cover their basic expenses (buying a computer, paying for transportation, buying books, paying conference fees and travel costs). Only students who benefit from their families and those rare cases where they have a supplementary source of income (for example a research grant¹¹) can devote their entire time to researching and writing a thesis. This situation was recently summarized by Kraśniewski (2008, 128):

Difficult financial conditions, i.e. low scholarships and limited extra support from research grants, forced most doctoral students to take part-time or, in extreme cases, even full-time employment outside the university. The obvious difficulties in dividing time between job-related activities and research work resulted in slow progress in research and a large number of resignations and dismissals from doctoral programmes.

Moreover, Desperak (2010) concludes her report on the precariat with university diplomas saying that, unlike in Western countries (however, this situation has been altered by the financial crisis), in Eastern European countries graduates are greatly affected by the processes of precarization. Doctoral candidates can be situated among this group (Standing 2011; Bousquet 2002; Bousquet 2008; Bousquet and Williams 2009), at least during their period of studies in many cases.

3.4 Partial conclusion

Starting from the 2008-2011 reform packages, the landscape of doctoral education in Poland is being deeply transformed. Thus, at this point, it is necessary to retain a good balance between focusing on the persistent and troublesome situation of doctoral candidates in the humanities at the moment and the newly emerging horizon of doctoral training. Another factor that should be necessarily taken into account is the “demographic tsunami” that Polish higher education intuitions will face in the years to come. This will substantially decrease the possibility of getting non-state, non-core revenues from paid and fee-based teaching from public higher education institutions – and in parallel, according to existing scenarios (Kwiek 2012), thereby having an impact on doctoral programmes in teaching-oriented institutions. However, this has to be carefully evaluated in the future.

All the data collected above was presented here to support the thesis that in contemporary Polish public higher education institutions, especially in the massified sector of teaching-oriented disciplines, one of the side effects of the growing enrolment in doctoral programmes

¹¹ The competitive grant-based research funding accessible for, among others, PhD candidates established through the institution of the Narodowe Centrum Nauki (National Science Centre) is probably the most important achievement in the recent wave of reforms in the Polish higher education sector that could have an enormous impact on the situation of doctoral candidates. However, its influence on their research engagement and their general well-being has still to be assessed.

is a decrease in the internal labour costs of institutions. The instrumentalization of enrolments by public institutions has clearly had a negative effect on the lives and career paths of doctoral candidates.

4 Capabilities, precarity and vulnerability

Many times and on various occasions Sen has defined capabilities (Sen 1993; Sen 1999; Sen 2009). According to one formulation capability is “a person’s ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being; [it] represents the alternative combinations of things a person is able to do or be” (Sen 1993, 30). The notion of capability is then connected with the notion of freedom and “the range of options a person has in deciding what kind of life to lead” (Sen and Dreze 1995, 11).

Sen’s capability approach is an open project. Various authors have already contributed to it by building a list, like Martha Nussbaum (2000), or proposing their own additional concepts. This is also the case of Jean Michel Bonvin, who in collaboration with many other authors has developed a critical concept of the capability for a voice. In general terms it can be describe as “the ability to express one’s opinions and thoughts and to make them count in the course of public discussion” (Bonvin and Farvaque 2008). It also implies the active engagement of a person in the process of establishing the rules regarding their social, political and economic surroundings. Another important capability proposed by Bonvin, used in this research, is the capability for work, which means “the real freedom to choose the work one has reason to value” (Bonvin and Farvaque 2008). It has at least two important dimensions: “a) capability not to work if one chooses to (via a valuable exit option) or b) capability to participate effectively in the definition of the work content, organisation, conditions, modes of remuneration” (Bonvin and Farvaque 2008). Further fundamental concepts used in Sen’s analysis are functionings. “The difference between a capability and functioning is one between an opportunity to achieve and the actual achievement, between *potential* and outcome.” (Unterhalter and Walker 2008, 9) And here we come to an interesting distinction of great importance for our understanding of the notion of capability. What is its potential character? Sen indicates that the notion of capability has its roots in Aristotelian *dynamis* (potentiality) (Sen 1993, 30) which can also be translated as “capability of existing or acting”. Aristotle takes up his considerations on the notion of potentiality in Book Theta of *Metaphysics*, claiming that “every potentiality is im-potentiality of the same and with respect to the same” (*tou autou kai kata to auto pasa dynamis adynamiai*) (Aristotle 1999, 1046a, 32) and that “what is potential can both be and not be. For the same is potential as much with respect to being as to not being” (*to dynaton endekhetai kai einai kai me einai*) (Aristotle 1999, 1050b, 10). On this basis, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1998; 1999) suggests that potentiality not necessarily and not instantly turns into actuality; moreover, it could even have its own, autonomous, consistent form. His standpoint is the direct opposite of common interpretations of the notion of potentiality that assume necessity of actualization. According to Agamben it is essential that “potentiality be able not to pass over into actuality, that potentiality constitutively be the potentiality not to (do or be), or, as Aristotle says, that potentiality be also im-potentiality (*adynamia*)” (Agamben 1998, 42).

Sen is close to such understanding of potentiality when he elaborates the concept of freedom with reference to its opportunity and process aspects (2009, 228–230). Opportunity is not full when its realization is somehow demanded, when certain capability has to necessarily lead into achievement or the exercise of certain functioning. In other words, when there is no “im-potentiality”, there is no capability either. Focusing on this ability of being able “not to” do or be, this perspective allows us to gain a profound insight into the notion of vulnerability. Not

being able to refuse (capability for work) or negotiate (capability for a voice) precarious forms of employment is a form of vulnerability (capability deprivation).

5 Doctoral programme in education at the peripheral teaching-oriented public university

This part of the article is based on a case study of a doctoral programme in Education¹², at one of the medium-size, medium-prestige universities in the North of Poland. It was chosen for a few reasons. First of all, current studies into Polish doctoral candidates' situation pay little attention to doctoral programmes outside the biggest universities, despite the fact that they constitute a large part of the doctoral education picture. Second, the chosen institution offers a programme in Education and Politics (my focus is only on Education) in a bi-annual changing formula: the first enrolment took place in the academic year 2006/2007 and it attracted 40 doctoral candidates for the full time, tuition free track. The following year's enrolment was for the part-time, tuition-based track. The department enrolls around 20 new doctoral candidates per year for the programme. However, despite the large number of accepted PhD candidates (in 2012 there were around 156 PhD candidates actively participating in the programme, 48 of them enrolled full-time) there were only 2 PhDs defended by 2011/2012, which means the institution reflects at the local level the abovementioned national trend of low PhD productivity in relation to the numbers of PhD candidates enrolled in the system. Finally, the last reason to pick this particular institution was that in the last few years in Poland there have not been many grass root protests conducted by doctoral candidates that focused on their material and well-being conditions at the university. But one of them took place in the studied institution. We decided to follow and interview the participants of the protest along with their colleagues from the department. The spontaneous mobilization and protest of doctoral candidates are seen here as a medium for exercising their capability for work and for a voice in the institutional context of the university as well as a way to address their vulnerable condition.

This part of my research is based on the results of 13 deep and semi-structured interviews conducted among doctoral candidates having the full range of years of studies (ages ranging from 25 up to the late thirties), preceded by a focus-group interview used for the evaluation and adaptation of the semi-open questionnaire. The experience of PhD education for some of the respondents began with the first enrolment in 2006/2007. The main process regarding doctoral candidates' mobilization took place two years later, in the academic year 2008/2009, and was an important point of reference not only for the most active group of doctoral candidates but for the whole population of participants in the programme. However, in this article's case study only a few aspects of doctoral candidates' situation in the department are covered. We focused mainly on their experience with teaching internships (capability for work), their self-perception of doctoral candidates' status (addressing their vulnerable condition), and finally, in the last subsection, on the limitations of accessible forms of negotiations as to their working conditions at the institution (lack of an institutionalized capability for a voice).

¹² The choice of this sector for my investigation was due to the development of massified paid teaching in it. Education (that in Poland is called *Pedagogika* – that is Pedagogy) is one of the most massified courses of studies, and one of the cheapest to run.

5.1 Teaching, workload and status

The organized grass roots struggle of my respondents was at first targeted mainly at spatial injustice and surveillance on the campus (its topology, investment in fences instead of doctoral stipends, or the installation of closed circuit cameras), but in the longer run the autonomous organization that they established started to address other issues also. In addition to successful demands for a common room for doctoral candidates, they also succeed in putting pressure on the dean and the authorities to introduce doctoral stipends into the programme (from 2006/2007 there had been none). In the academic year 2009/2010 the first doctoral stipends were granted due to this mobilization and struggle, and their number was supposed to increase by 2 additional stipends per year. In 2012, their number amounted to 6. However stipends and spatial injustice were not the only issues raised by the doctoral candidates. They also addressed the lack of opportunity to undertake the regular 90 hours of unpaid teaching internships. At a first glance this situation would seem to be in deep contradiction with the thesis developed in this article. Nonetheless, as put by Mateusz, a PhD candidate in Education (2008/2009)¹³, it has a rational core:

For example, during the first year of studies we struggled for “teaching internships”, and as early as in the second year we began to be forced to have them. The university has a rare skill to turn our dreams into nightmares.

This unexpected turn had its roots in the institutional budgetary strategy of the university. In December 2011, the university announced a financial discipline demanding that any overtime teaching hours of any member of the academic faculty should be, if possible, transferred to and be done by doctoral candidates in the framework of their obligatory “unpaid teaching internship”. The masses of precariat doctoral candidates, the internal reserve army, were then put to work.

As mentioned above, the very term “teaching internship” in a doctoral programme is usually used as a veil to cover a practice that lacks any professional supervision and also has to be undertaken by the candidates who have pedagogical qualifications and classroom experience. This paradoxical situation was emphasized in many of the interviews:

When I worked as a teacher, I always had to fill out the working hours sheet and calculate my “per hour salary”. I was shocked when I realized that at the university my “per hour salary” is 0. All my life it was obvious that teaching is work. Dagmara, PhD candidate in Education, (2008/2009)

Such an intuitive opinion expressed by Dagmara overlapped with the advice received by doctoral candidates from the “Solidarity” Trade Union; according to law, a teaching internship without any supervision is a regular labour relationship. However, the authorities at the department remained deaf to such arguments.

Moreover, in many cases, especially in massified teaching-oriented departments, doctoral candidates in fee-based part-time tracks or those without stipends are encouraged to take up more teaching hours than suggested by the limit of 90 hours per annum. This was the case for nearly all doctoral candidates from the part-time track that I interviewed (100% of participants in the tuition-based part-time track were females). They pay a tuition fee of around 1125

¹³ All the quoted respondents are anonymized and presented under pseudonyms. The year in the brackets indicates the first academic year of their doctoral studies.

euros per annum, are not eligible for doctoral stipends at the department, teach up to 210 hours a year out of which 30 hours completely unpaid, maintain 1-2 jobs outside the university, while, at the same time, some of them raise their children and take care of their families. One of the doctoral candidates described the immense imbalance that this burden of work and obligations causes in the following words:

Work takes at least 98% of my conscious life. I can say it without any hesitation - I have no life - no private life..., and this is an enormous burden, Aneta, PhD candidate in Education, (2010/2011)

Therefore, it is fully understandable that overburdened by such a workload doctoral candidates will seek the stability and security provided by a clearly determined status and obligations. The need for the contextualization of the demand regarding status was pointed out by one of the doctoral candidates highly active in the mobilization:

I remember the moment when we were considering and thinking through our set of demands regarding a strategy on the status of doctoral candidates. The question whether to shift it towards that of a worker or that of a student was posed. At that time, one of our colleagues from the biotechnology department asked us frankly: Why do you want to become employees? I feel good as a doctoral candidate myself! I think that he would prefer to move closer towards student status if he could. His situation was quite different from ours – he was employed at the laboratory, had the full stipend and was a part of the institution. At the same time, we were in an ambiguous situation, without any stipends, without anything – so we tended toward the status of employees..., Bartłomiej, PhD candidate in Education, (2006/2007)

Like in the words of Bartłomiej, many interviewed doctoral candidates expressed the desire for a clear-cut regulated status as well as for stable working conditions. Their main motivation for undertaking doctoral studies and to remain in the programme, despite all the obstacles, was their self-development and the pursuit of knowledge. The final achievement in this process was, of course, finishing and defending their PhD thesis which, however, due to conflictual obligations and the lack of any opportunity to focus on their research, was becoming a more and more unachievable horizon.

5.2 Having a voice at the university and the struggle for the institutionalization of a voice

After making their voices heard inside the institution, doctoral candidates faced the problem of the reproduction of their small-scale movement and of exercising their representation within the institution. Ongoing collective grass root struggles draw people away from research and from the process of writing their thesis. Accessible institutional forms, like doctoral councils, do not seem to be enough, as long as they remain suitable tools only for the administration of the past achievements. Without a stable and institutional framework for bargaining in respect of their working conditions, everything will have to be continuously negotiated from the same zero-level. As Ania, PhD candidate in Education, (2008/2009) said clearly:

We have to start once again from the beginning. This is more than obvious in the light of personnel changes among the university authorities, elections of deans and so on. Another wave of struggle is coming. The starting point for the discussion is not the level that we have achieved – our “agreements” are not recognized as a point of departure in any further actions of the authorities. We see that we have influence, but we have to

input a new portion of energy. New struggles are on the horizon. And this is somehow depressing.

A similar fear was explicit in one of the comments from a first year doctoral candidate as well:

I'm not sure. I feel that when they will be gone, I mean the people from the fourth year... I don't want to be pessimistic... I think that our situation will get worse... And certainly it won't improve in anyway, Sylwia, PhD candidate in Education (2011/2012).

The interviewed doctoral candidates saw clearly the benefits of organized and collective resistance for bettering their situation at the faculty. However, they lacked the institutionalized collective capability for having a voice, which results in the situation where all previous solid achievements of the doctoral candidates struggle can suddenly melt into thin air.

6 Conclusion

The present status of Polish doctoral candidates in teaching-oriented institutions in education has a negative impact on their capability for work and the capability for having a voice. The existing liminal condition of doctoral candidates, being-in-between students and academic employees, is not a beneficial option. They lack a solid institutional framework that would enable them to have collective negotiations on their “teaching internships” or research’s conditions. Without being able to refuse or to negotiate the conditions of their quasi-employment they will still be disposable and vulnerable subjects of administrative decisions, who are never able to focus on fulfilling their valuable ‘beings and doings’.

However, the choice of status is clearly a political decision, and it should not necessarily be made at the most general, national level. A one-size-fits-all recipe could be harmful in this case and should be avoided through a differentiation of solutions at disciplinary or even institutional level. Nonetheless, it is clear that it should be determined in one way or the other. Nevertheless, such a decision has to be informed by empirical evidence drawn from large-scale comparative, quantitative data sets, like at least the EURODOC survey (if Poland finally takes part in the project). This can shed more light on the reasons for dropouts in PhD programmes, which are a key to understanding the low level of productivity for PhD titles in the Polish higher education system¹⁴.

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