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SOCIAL INNOVATIONS IMPLEMENTED BY HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS AS ELEMENTS OF PROCESS OF TEACHING ACCREDITATION AND RESEARCH ASSESSMENT IN POLAND IN THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to describe and analyze social innovation implemented by Polish higher education institutions (HEIs) as an element of teaching accreditation and research assessment processes in (1) the context of the third mission of the university and (2) concerning other European science and higher education systems.

The paper takes as its starting point an analysis of the literature and discourse on innovation in the university in relation to teaching and research. That was followed by reviewing and interpreting documents of the Polish Accreditation Committee (PKA) and the Committee for the Evaluation of Academic Units (KEJN). For the study, the author read 103 program evaluation reports of the Polish Accreditation Commission to look for the bad and best practices in criteria for scientific and professional cooperation between the university and stakeholders. Finally, a comparative approach was adopted, pointing to the international context of the discussed subject, including the agencies in each country undertaking evaluations analogous to PKA and KEJN.

Innovations are essential factors of social development, realized not only by different types of companies but also by the private, public, or non-governmental sectors. Organizations and institutions operating in the economy, including universities, whose general activities are situated in different areas, create their own typical and original innovations to increase work efficiency and transparency. The other aim is to raise employees' subjectivity or proficiency level. Nowadays, social innovations have become part of the statutory activities of

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the university (treated as the Third Mission – TM), located in the sphere of two main tasks, i.e., education and research. As a main result, there are 11 universities (in the group of 103) whose forms and ways of collaboration were evaluated below the required standards. On the other hand, in the case of 4 universities, experts pointed to good practice. The individual case studies in the article describe one and the other group in detail.

The article discusses existing definitions of social innovation. It also proposes a new one dedicated to universities that can be beneficial from the point of view of teaching accreditation and research assessment processes. The text additionally analyses good practices in cooperation with the stakeholders, which can be defined as social innovations. The analysis is presented in the European context.

1. INTRODUCTION

Universities are institutions whose influence on social or political reality and economic growth is significant for modern societies. Their tasks are not only education or research, but there is a more and more noticeable and meaningful role in fulfilling the third mission (TM) (Kola & Leja, 2015). As Francesca Spigarelli and Lorenzo Compagnucci pointed out: "in recent years, there has been increasing pressure on Universities to shift from mainly teaching and performing research, and adding a TM, portrayed as *a contribution to society*" (Abreu et al., 2016; Urdari et al., 2017, cit. per. Spigarelli and Compagnucci 2020, p. 1). They consider universities' engagement in TM activities to be recognized as *engines* that contribute to the social, economic, and cultural development of the countries or regions in which they operate (Spigarelli & Compagnucci, 2020). This potentially huge impact on societies is processing by transferring knowledge and technologies to industry and society (Spigarelli & Compagnucci, 2020). Part of these activities realized as the third mission of the university is social innovations that should be an integral part of the innovation scientific policy of any university that implements its third mission (Kola & Leja, 2015). It is possible because "An important characteristic of social innovation is its capacity to involve in the generation of solutions to actors from all sectors and according to the social, economic, environmental, institutional, and cultural context where it takes place" (Portales, 2019).

The article discusses the role of social innovation in the university's operation in two fundamental processes, i.e., teaching accreditation and research assessment. The article's author indicates that they create social benefits for the academic and local community and for the community per se. They can also occur in these two areas – teaching accreditation and research assessment – and additionally resolving value in educational and scientific competition between universities. In the article, the way of thinking is reversed, as it shows the place and role of social innovations in teaching accreditation and research assessment based on reports of these two areas researched by the author. The main problem of the research is: what is the role of social innovations in the teaching accreditation and research assessment process at Polish universities?

2. SOCIAL INNOVATIONS' DEFINITIONS

Luis Portales, in his work *Social Innovation and Social Entrepreneurship: Fundamentals, Concepts, and Tools,* points out that "The promise of social change by social innovation leads to the position of the concept within the agenda of international organizations, governments, companies, non-profit organizations, and academia, who through various initiatives promote their development from a practical perspective as theoretical" (2019, VII). This allows for a change in thinking about the university no longer as an ivory tower (Bok, 1982) but a lively institution full of initiative and relationships supporting different areas of society – industry, public services, education, policy, etc. Portales also shows the unique role of social innovations, which "as a consequence of social impulse" can be "the proliferation of approximations in its theoretical understanding, as well as the generation of initiatives of all sectors of society to encourage the creation of a greater number of social innovations, especially in contexts characterized by exclusion, marginalization, and poverty" (2019, VII). Nowadays, in economic, environmental, energetic, and war crises, the pro-social activities of universities seem extremely important for societies. Public funds coming from the states' budgets or European Union sources that are spent on research and education in these difficult times should serve a social purpose of trying to solve the current problems of societies rather than focusing only on the core (Krasnopolskaya & Minnigaleeva, 2018).

The definition of social innovation developed by the Young Foundation presented in the TEPSIE project (Theoretical, Empirical, and Policy Foundations for Building Social Innovation in Europe), funded by the European Commission, states that: "Social innovations are new solutions (products, services, models, markets, processes, etc.) that, simultaneously, satisfy a social need (more effectively than existing solutions), create new or better capabilities and relationships, and make better use of assets and resources" (The Young Foundation, 2012, p. 18). This is a fairly broad definition, which allows formulating some implications for social development, i.e., "social innovations are good for society and improve society's capacity to act" (The Young Foundation, 2012, p. 18). More precisely, it is worth emphasizing the difference between social innovation and any other type of innovation, which, after all, also induces a change in society and stimulates the capacity to act among citizens or employees (Table 1).

Table 1

Comparison of different types of innovation and social innovation

	Innovations	Social Innovations
Economic	Focused on the generation of income. Commercial motivation	Motivation in social value and transformation of society
Radical	There is no interest in improving the living conditions of excluded populations. They can generate damages or externalities for society	Aim for the improvement of society. Intentionality in social change
Disruptive	Low-cost products and vision of the beneficiaries as a market segment. Commercial motivation	Motivation focused on social value and view of the marginalized population as development actors
Bottom-up	Change in society at the local level	Change in society at the system level
Social programs	Welfare perspective and preservation of the social structure	Vision-based on the empowerment and change of the social structure

One can see there the main difference – the meaning of the benefit. Portales states: "While economic innovation seeks to generate a commercial or financial benefit, social innovation seeks social change" (Portales, 2019, p. 9). These benefits are guaranteed by cooperation, not competition between actors, which can increase the gaps between different sectors of society (Yunus, 2010).

In other words, social innovation has several attributes that have increased people's life from a long-term perspective. It changes social systems in society on different scales – not only states' industries but also health systems, care systems, universities, and other educational institutions. Social innovation "reinforced the need to generate alternative and innovative systems that allow addressing these problems in a systemic rather than a partial way" (Portales, 2019, p. 11).

Phills, Deiglmeier, and Miller, in the article *Rediscovering social innovation* (2008), assume that one can see social innovation from two perspectives (2008). Innovation can be treated as a process and outcome (Phills et al., 2008). Furthermore, "To be considered an innovation, a process or outcome must meet two criteria: novelty and improvement" (Phills et al., 2008, p. 37).

However, both features are united by the third one – sustainable development incorporating a broader ecological perspective. Indeed, each innovation or invention should be created as an environmentally friendly idea. Social innovation's third main attribute must represent circular, pro-environmental thinking and potential impact globally. It is crucial to develop local solutions that can be used to generate global innovations. Research should today serve not only local communities or countries but all of humanity. This way of thinking is similar or close to the idea represented by Alfred Nobel, who founded a prize for those who, with the results of their scientific activities, can help others in social and economic development and care for the health and life of every human being. Thus, the author postulates adding to research defined as **a social innovation** a factor that could have a global impact that (1) **reduces social inequality** and be an action for social inclusion and (2) **stops environmental degradation** and be an action for sustainable development.

3. SOCIAL INNOVATION IN THE PROCESS OF ACCREDITATION AND SCIENTIFIC EVALUATION AT POLISH UNIVERSITIES

The article presents the results of research on social innovation at Polish universities. The main problem of the study is: what is the role of social innovations in teaching accreditation and research assessment processes at Polish universities?

The research uses the desk research method to determine whether universities present activities defined as social innovations in the accreditation process and research assessment. The study is based on the Polish Accreditation Commission (PKA) reports and the Committee for Assessment of Research Units (KEJN) documentation.

The methodology adopted in this document is a systematic review of the documents and reports of the institutions mentioned above. For the study, the author read 103 program evaluation reports of the Polish Accreditation Commission to look for the bad and best practices in criteria for scientific and professional cooperation between the university and stakeholders. The reports are public and available to read for everyone after the final decision of the Minister of Education and Science. The analyzed reports were published in a year

(12 months – from January 2022 to January 2023). The assessment of PKA includes ten criteria for the quality of university education – they are described as detailed criteria for program assessment in Annex No. 2 to the Statutes of the Polish Accreditation Committee. One of the criteria is "cooperation with social and economic stakeholders on the development, implementation, and improvement of the study program and its impact on the development of the degree program." Experts who evaluate this criterion put attention on "Cooperation with social and economic stakeholders, including employers, on the development, implementation, and improvement of the study program is ensured" and "Relations with social and economic stakeholders about the study program and their impact on the program and its implementation are subject to regular reviews carried out with the participation of students. The results of reviews are taken into consideration in improvement measures".

Also, in the Strategy of the Polish Accreditation Committee, which will be implemented until 2025, strategic areas underline cooperation between PKA and public and private sector institutions and organizations. In Strategic Area I, PKA is defined as an upholder of higher education quality standards, and in Strategic Area II – PKA is a partner in fostering quality culture. Strategic goals are to build a relationship between the studies and the university's strategy and between the university and stakeholders, initiating and conducting a debate on key issues related to the quality of education culture in universities. Thus, PKA aims to intensify dialogue with external and internal stakeholders (university candidates, relatives and educators, entrepreneurs, employers, and organizations). This dialogue can be implemented by, e.g., "consultations with institutions from PKA's environment on its functioning and challenges in ensuring and improving the quality of education in higher education in the 21st century." This activity requires deepening relations with business organizations and institutions, employers, and leaders of social projects to succeed.

For the study, 103 program evaluation reports of PKA were analyzed, focusing on cooperation between universities and stakeholders. As a main result, there are 11 universities (in the group of 103) whose forms and ways of collaboration were evaluated below the required standards. On the other hand, in the case of 4 universities, experts pointed to good practice.

The problems with standards of cooperation between universities and the stakeholders are based on a need for more permanent and formalized cooperation with institutions of the social and economic environment and a low level of diversification of the form of collaboration. Cooperation should not be limited only to the organization of internships but should have a broader and more intensive character. Experts state the lack of regular and formalized reviews of the study program by representatives of the socio-economic environment, especially by alumnus of the university. They recommended developing cooperation with external stakeholders to provide students access to the newest knowledge and technologies.

Experts underline a list of best practices in cooperation between universities and organizations, and institutions, e.g., playing a crucial role in developing the region-building model relations of the business–science–administration. It could provide a diverse and wide range of sources of funds for teaching, research, and self-development. Universities create a proper environment for commercializing research and services and engaging in current and long-range projects that lead to breakthrough innovations.

In the accreditation process, universities show their crucial role in transferring competence and building systems of creative participation in solving the problems of residents, the city, and the region. Thus, one can say about creating local intellectual and social capital. This

process was conducted by many different local actors and forms, e.g., the development of cooperation with local high schools as an initiative called "patronage classes."

Developing both research and teaching aims, universities decide to invest funds in infrastructure, e.g., in machinery parks or production lines that allow R&D activities, including commercial ones. To reach a large scale of developing HEI, look for companies that can be sponsors to provide research equipment and software. They are asked to sponsor conferences, funding scholarships, and prizes for students and young scientists.

One of the essential activities linking universities and stakeholders is multifaceted cooperation in research and development projects that involve students as contractors in these applied projects. It causes the prevalence of diploma theses in close scientific and research collaboration with the socio-economic environment. The result of that everyday activity is the improvement of the study program with new elements concerning the updating of curriculum content, new didactic forms that increase the effectiveness of the learning process, and the use of the latest world technologies in this process. The effect of that can be fruitful to society because of inventing new research with attributes of innovations, e.g., the Mars rover projected by AGH University of Science and Technology students who won one of the most prestigious contests International Rover Challenge 2023, in India.

Social innovation in research assessment of universities is much more difficult to describe. There is an assessment of, i.e., social impact, which is the third criterion in evaluating research activities, which experts in particular disciplines rate. Each university prepares a report on its research once every four years. This report is mainly based on the outputs of research activities. Still, one part of it is a description of activities carried out for the benefit of society, and for this reason, it is called "social impact." The description of impact takes place on several levels: global reach and significance, regional reach and significance, local reach and significance, and minor reach and significance. These criteria can also be evaluated as an activity with "no relevance or no proven link between scientific activity and impact."

Marta Natalia Wróblewska states that "*Impact*, understood broadly as the influence of academic research beyond the academic sphere, including areas such as business, education, public health, policy, public debate, culture, etc., has been progressively implemented in various systems of science evaluation" is a trend observable worldwide (2020, 2; after Donovan, 2011; Grant et al., 2009; European Science Foundation, 2012). The impact is part of the research evaluation of the Australian Research Quality Framework – RQF (Donovan, 2008) and the Dutch Standard Evaluation Protocol (VSNU – Association of Universities in the Netherlands, 2016) or British Research Excellence Framework (REF) what is as part of a broader governmental policy – the Impact Agenda. The British system of evaluation is the most influential for universities, also for the Polish system, but not everyone has to agree with its terms and conditions. Many experts contrast the impact versus academic quality of research. E.g., Stefan Collini, Professor of Intellectual History and English Literature at the University of Cambridge criticized the changes to valuation in these terms. He argues that: "instead of proposing that *impact* of this kind is a desirable social good over and above the quality of the research, and the exercise makes the extent of such impact part of the measurement of the quality of the research. In terms of this exercise, research plus marketing is not just better than research without marketing: it is better to research" (2009, p. 19). The others reflect on the observable consequences of this kind of academic practice (Wróblewska 2021, Chubb et al., 2016).

Nowadays, in Poland, the research assessment of the universities implemented in 2017–2021 is completed. The following evaluation will include the years 2022–2025. Each university gets to know the results defined as awarded scientific categories. Categories are known, but the knowledge of the social innovation and social impact system, i.e., criteria 3 of the evaluation, still needs to be revealed. This knowledge needs to be more transparent, although only some universities and dissertations make reviews of their applications public. It is very interesting how they define social impact, while this is still far from the understanding of social innovation.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

Michał Kleiber emphasizes that "social innovation is not usually important for contemporary Poland." He states: "The world is facing a number of challenges of such a broad nature that it would be a huge misconduct to omit the social aspect from innovation activities" (2013). As it was analyzed in the article, not all HEIs find social innovation equally important and defined. This is still a field for universities to develop. Witold Kwaśnicki asks the fundamental question for universities whether social innovation is a new paradigm or the next stage in human creativity? (2013). For the article's author, the answer can be only one – the future of universities is available only with social innovations.

The latter, in the relevant literature and the practice of educational institutions, is becoming increasingly associated with sustainability. It implies not only pro-environmental thinking and practice in these institutions but also – appropriate action for the benefit of the local community and cooperation with it. This change of emphasis is significant. It is about a community 'dynamic interactive capabilities' in which universities co-evolve with the local community (Von Tunzelmann & Wang, 2003, after Petersen, 2022). The social innovations produced within TM must therefore be localized. Universities are seen in Europe in their natural local innovation ecosystem (Reichert, 2019). Governments and administrations are supposed to create the framework, and businesses capitalize on innovations and employ alumni. Still, it is up to universities to be proactive in innovative creativity, including involving the local community in the knowledge production process. In this sense, the local context determines to a large extent, the third mission of each university.

Contrary to the unifying approach coming from the state and supranational regulators in the HE sector, the university tailors its third mission according to the profile, the local public, the partners, and the area in which it is placed (observations from UK research confirm this – Kitagawa et al., 2016). Following this line of thought, it should therefore be assumed that the determinants of evaluation systems – whether teaching accreditation or research assessment – should also be local. An example is the Italian study "A new method for evaluating universities' third mission activities in Italy: Case study contribution to the OECD TIP Knowledge Transfer and Policies project." The Italian example is based on the experience of ANVUR, the Italian Agency for evaluating universities and research, which has been involved in university TM evaluation for more than a decade. It has prepared a Manual for the Evaluation of Third Mission and organized the Committee of Evaluation of Third Mission – CETM. Universities are evaluated from the perspective of the quality of teaching, research, or administrative functioning and TM (Blasi et al., 2019). The Italian system identifies eight critical areas for this evaluation: intellectual property, academic spin-off companies, third-party research,

intermediaries, cultural heritage, contribution to public health, lifelong learning, and public engagement (Blasi et al., 2019). It is evident that the selection of elements to be evaluated in this process is always adventurous, contextually dependent on the socio-economic-political situation, on the changes taking place in universities, but also in their public perception.

Like these, Italian evaluation mechanisms operate in other countries, including the British Research Excellence Framework, the Dutch Standard Evaluation Protocol, and the Australian Engagement and Impact Assessment. Different systems were already described in detail a decade ago by Lutz Bornmann (2013), pointing to the early 1990s as the beginning of the evaluation process in the world of the social impact of knowledge and universities.

Today, however, there are significant developments in this process. These are due to the long-term effects of the changes brought about by the Bologna process, the concentration of students on undergraduate studies, the growing importance of alumni competencies, and preparation for the labor market under conditions of high social uncertainty and continuous variability or fluidity. The shift in emphasis on evaluating research and higher education at the European level is also essential. The practical aspect of knowledge creation, labor market teaching, lifelong learning, and open educational systems such as micro-credentials are forcing a significant shift on a European scale. TM evaluation is, therefore, no longer taking place locally but is moving to increasingly higher levels – including, for example, the assessment of strictly European research projects. The ongoing work on citizen engagement for knowledge valorization within the European Commission clearly shows the way for the EU member states. The challenge that still faces us – both from a national and a European level – is to maintain, with common regulations, the potential for local differences of particular universities and to secure their innovative potential in cooperation with stakeholders. Global knowledge always has its local potential.

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