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Trust in Educational Interactions in Higher Education Institutions: Examination as an Experience of Trust ¹

Abstract

The article presents the results of the research on one of the manifestations of trust in higher education institutions, namely the attitude of students to examination and test supervision executed by objective observers. The research was conducted in June 2013 and the specific question applied in the research tool was a real example from the academic life, which was discussed in the media. The context of the analysis is mass nature of higher education. The text presents statistics showing the scale and growth of academic enrolment rate in Poland in the last quarter-century. The analysis focuses on the consequences of the mass nature of higher education for the experience of trust in educational interactions, and precisely on the experience of trust during examinations. In this paper we present a small part of our research on culture of trust in educational interactions assisted by ICT.

Keywords: *educational interactions, academic life, higher education*

Introduction

In an open, dynamically changing society in which relationships take unprecedented, indirect forms, trust is not only an attractive, but primarily cognitively

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important subject of research. The increased interest in trust as an agent and medium of human functioning is visible in the social sciences, especially in the sciences of education. An important reason for dealing with trust in the context of education is a social expectation that education is a factor in shaping the attitudes of trust, as a condition of existence and manifestation of civil society and the involvement of people in responsible functioning in the public sphere. Trust is a factor of social and civic involvement and it also has a significant place in shaping the quality of life. Trust in the context of education can be seen in three aspects: a) trust to education, b) trust in education and c) education to trust. Each of the listed aspects contains many elements and each of these elements is the subject of pedagogical reflection.

The first aspect: trust to education includes phenomena such as trust to educational institutions, trust to the effects of education, such as subjective competence of graduates, the value of diplomas, etc. Trust in education (aspect b) can be seen as trust to the content of education, standards applicable in education, as well as trust to people- participants in educational interactions. A separate, yet coherent with the previous aspects subject of pedagogical reflection and exploration of practical solutions is the education to trust (aspect c). Trust, as a personal disposition and social binder, is the purpose and medium of education.

Broadening of the circle of social contacts creates new conditions for the experience of trust. They go beyond family, friends and neighbours. It also changes the possibilities to use past experience in interpersonal relations. Traditional multi-sensory experience in dealing with the other person (sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste) is limited to seeing and hearing others, and sometimes only to contacting a person's creation, which in turn narrows the possibilities of communication, especially mutual understanding and agreement.

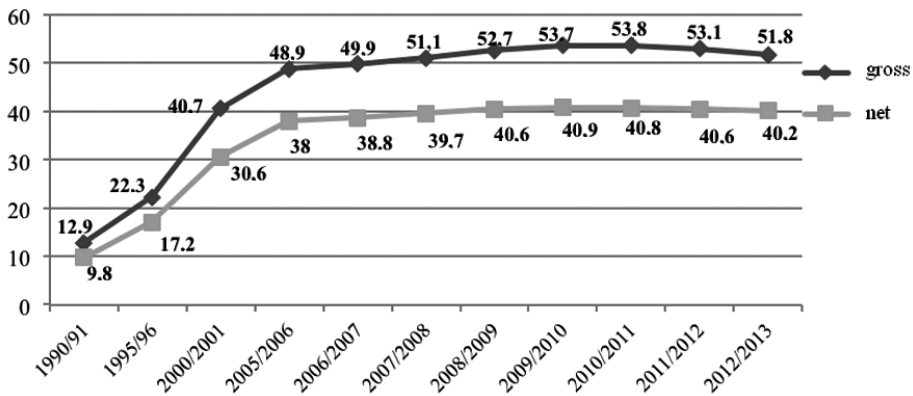
Besides the indirectness of communication, the next factor that hinders the experience of trust in the higher education is its mass nature. This phenomenon raises ambivalence. On the one hand, the growth rate in academic enrolment is a welfare factor for both the individual and the collective, but on the other hand, it creates new problems. Their multiplicity and diversity make it difficult to present even a little part of them in this article, because this paper aims to focus on one of them, namely, the consequences for the experience of trust in educational interactions, and more precisely on the experience of trust in exam situations. The complexity of this seemingly narrow issue induced us to present its background and essence on the basis of survey research – students' response to some event in one of the universities in Poland. The said event was a proposal of the Student Government on a package of solutions to increase the sense of trust between the student and the lecturer.

The first part of this article includes a brief presentation of the phenomenon and contexts of the mass nature of higher education. On its basis, the opportunities and barriers to the experience of trust were discussed. The final part includes questions about the conditions for developing trust in exam situations and types of trust.

The mass nature of academic education – is plenty really no plague?

The process of social and political change most strongly manifested itself in the field of academic education. Many factors led to great dynamics in the statistical measure of educational activity- academic enrolment rates. This is illustrated by the data contained in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Academic enrolment rate between 1990 and 2013



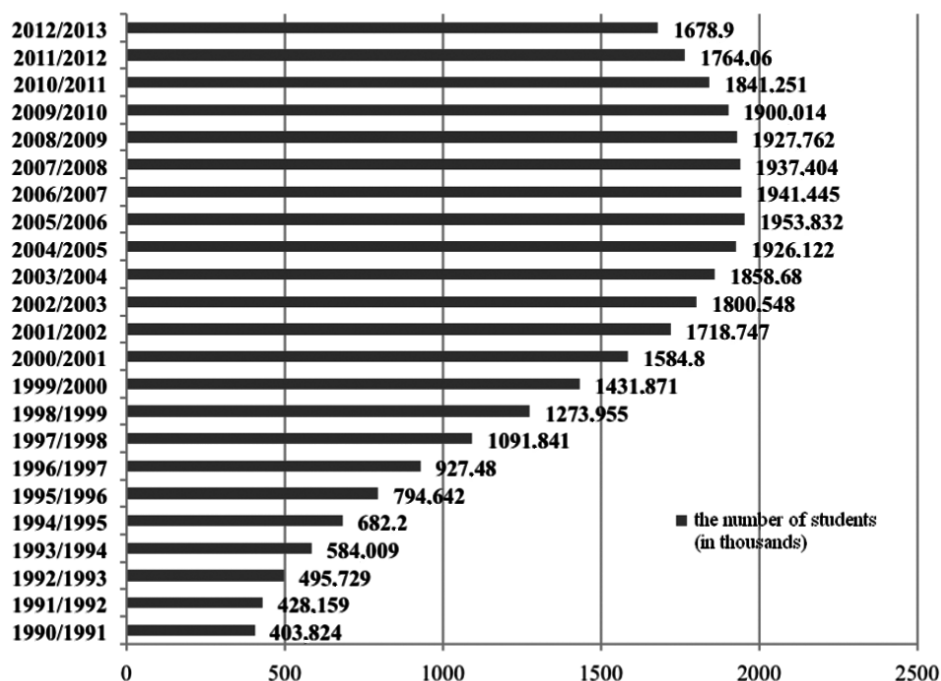
Source: own study based on the data from Central Statistical Office

The presented academic enrolment rates (gross and net²), which form the basis for talking about the “Polish educational miracle,” are even more pronounced in comparison with the number of students in particular years: from 403 824

² Net academic enrollment rate expresses (in percent) the relationship between the number of learners (as of the beginning of the academic year) and the population (as of December 31) in the age group defined as corresponding to that level of education, i.e., 19–24 years of age. Gross enrollment ratio is the relationship (in percent) between all the learners in higher education institutions and the entire population (as of December 31) in the age nominally assigned to that

thousand students in the academic year 1990/1991 to 1 678 900 in the academic year 2012/2013. This is illustrated by the data presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. The growth rate of the number of students



Source: own study based on the data from Central Statistical Office.

Last quarter-century has been a special period in the Polish academic education. The effect of this kind of “miracle” is a mass nature of academic education with all of its consequences- both positive and negative. The positive consequences of such a radical increase in the number of students should include conditions for personal development and social change. The mass nature of access to academic education is beneficial in terms of both personal and social perspective. Solid education of broad masses of people is the foundation of prosperity and welfare. It is a factor of experiencing individual and collective subjectivity.

level of education. Cf., http://www.stat.gov.pl/cps/rde/xbcr/gus/e_not_nt_szkol_wyzszych_w_Polsce.pdf (accessed 23.02.2014)

The trouble is, however, that the mass nature of higher education is also accompanied by phenomena such as saturated classrooms, difficulties in the access to library resources, and above all, an increase in the anonymity of participants in educational interactions resulting from the reduction of opportunities for direct interactions at various stages of the educational process. As a result, education is not always solid, which reduces trust in the effects of academic education. Inflation of academic titles increases not because of its universality, but due to an opinion about the way of its achieving, since university recruitment procedures arouse critical comments. Access to studies is easier, e.g., thanks to the goodwill of politicians. An example of this is the 2006 “Matura exam amnesty”, which was eponymously called “Giertych’s Matura exam”. Beneficiaries of the amnesty, who undertook studies, have already completed them (BA in 2009 and MA in 2011). It is possible that they are among the third cycle students (PhD). Although each higher education institution aims to enrol those candidates who can complete their studies successfully, in the case of the “invisible hand” of the fiscal policy and the treatment of academic education as a self-funding enterprise, enrolment is realized by the criterion called, for the purpose of this research, “a beating pulse” (“if a student has a pulse, he/she will be enrolled”). This means that every person who wants to begin studies, regardless of his or her abilities to meet the demands of the university, has a chance to become a student. It affects the implementation of the functions of higher education institutions, especially universities. Immanuel Wallerstein writes (*European universalism. The rhetoric of power*, pp. 81/82): “This has had the consequence of what I call a trend to the “secondary-school-ization” of the university, a long term downplaying of research along with an increase in teaching responsibilities (particularly large classes). In addition, because of the financial squeeze, universities have been moving in the direction of becoming actors on the marketplace – by selling their services to enterprises and governments, and by transforming their professors’ research results into patents they can exploit (if not directly, then at least by licensing)”.

This trend of economic usefulness is reinforced by the use of scientific and educational infrastructure built with EU funds (Letter of the Minister of Science and Higher Education prof. Lena Kolarska-Bobinska to public university rectors of 19 February 2014 http://www.nauka.gov.pl/g2/oryginal/2014_02/899c807d9ef309d42264b6fe9d5dd33b.pdf accessed on 02.24.2014). This orientation leads to the situation in which the university loses its elitism and the status of an “ivory tower”. However, this is not the source and object of concern, but the decreasing trust in academic education. This applies to both the type of trust that Sztompka (2007, p 148) calls public trust, as well as to consumer trust (if we remain in the

market area). The first of them is expressed in the expectations directed towards actors of public life: institutions, organizations that people contact only indirectly. The second one is the expectation of good quality of goods and services – and as such people more commonly consider the academic education and graduation diploma.

Trust in exam situations

“If we wish to discover the truth about an education system, we must look into its assessment procedures” (Derek Rowntree: *Assessing Students: How Shall We Know Them?*, Harper and Row, London 1987, p. 1).

One of the effects of the mass nature of academic education is the change of the forms of examination. Examinations and assessments are one of the most difficult responsibilities of academic teachers- emotionally draining, intellectually involving and arousing many ethical dilemmas. According to Greg Light, Roy Cox, and Susanna Calkins (*Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. The Reflective Professional*, SAGE, London 2011, pp. 200/201), students can be confident that this is not the effects of their learning that are assessed, but they as people. Associations with *correct* and *incorrect* could cause more primitive associations, such as *good* and *bad*, causing anxiety and loss of trust.

Examination and assessment play a special role in the social and moral development. The experience gained in the process of examinations and passing individual tasks are subject to generalization to other situations in which assessment is carried out by others (especially of the higher status), while presenting one’s own achievements in order to achieve highly valuable benefits, etc.

The time-honoured tradition of oral examination, which is yet another educational interaction, giving the opportunity to deepen the understanding of studied problems, correct any errors of interpretation and favouring the formation of mutual trust among the actors of academic education, disappears from academic practices. For the vast majority of students, the first oral exam is the Bachelor’s degree exam and students describe it as a very difficult experience. A similar opinion is expressed also by academic teachers, who at the time of such examinations discover communication incompetence of students.

Reducing the academic examinations to “modern” limiting testing has far-reaching consequences for both the intellectual and emotional condition of the student and their moral sphere. It carries many temptations of breaking the rules of fairness, causes suspicion both against exam candidates and examiners. It also

reduces trust in the results of academic education, including trust to the diploma formally certifying the competence of the graduate. This is of particular importance in the situation of a high academic enrolment rate and the associated diploma inflation. The difficulty in finding a satisfactory job that meets the competences certified with diploma(s) and certificate(s) limits trust in the diploma awarding institution. This applies both to the holders of diplomas and those who decide about placing the person in the social structure on the basis of such documents.

At the same time, there are objections raised against the traditional oral examinations concerning the subjectivity of examiners, sometimes even their quirks and phobias. To be honest, these allegations are sometimes made in the case of written examinations as well. Assessment of written papers and other assignments is also burdened with subjectivity, especially if there are no clear assessment criteria.

This is the reason why people still seek optimum and objective forms of controlling educational results. Both examiners and candidates attempt at and report initiatives aimed at maximizing the objectification and fairness in the process of examination. These ideas and initiatives are followed by many arguments, and trust takes a significant place among them.

This research project involves partners from five countries (Poland, India, Norway, Russia and Italy). During discussion on research tools, we agreed that each partner may add issues specific to their country to the common tool. Since the following initiative of students was “top” press news in Poland at that time (Winter Examination Session 2013) and provoked lively discussions in the environment, we decided to use it to get to know the opinion of the participants in educational interactions in higher education institutions and read them through the prism of the arguments used, and most of all to determine how often they argue their position with the *trust* category. The Polish respondents were therefore asked the question below. Also partners from Russia added it to their research tool, but the results from Russian universities will be available at a later stage of the project. Therefore, in this paper we present only the responses of Polish students.

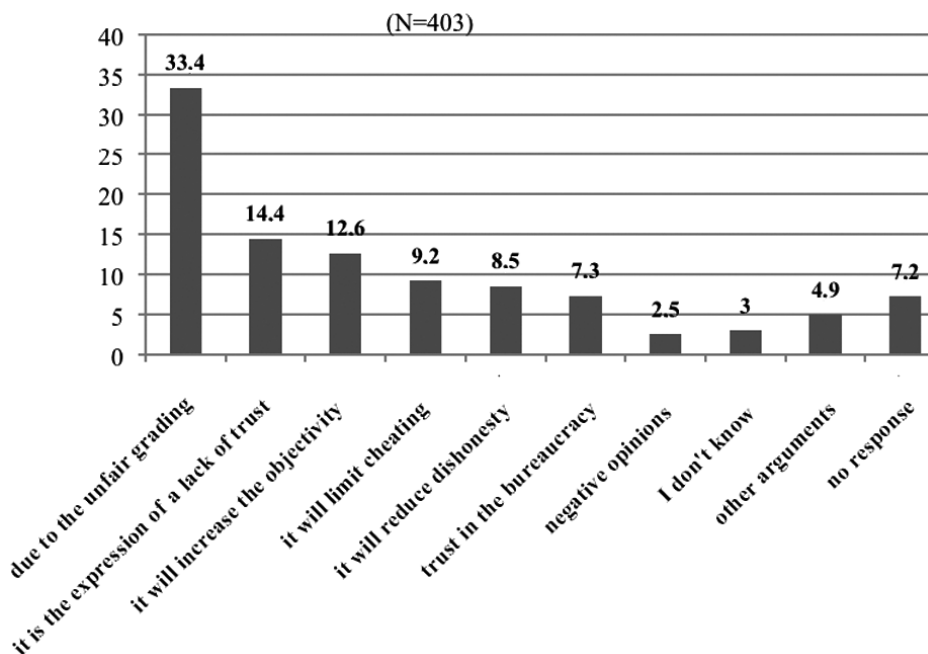
In our research we asked students of the second-cycle studies (who have already had experience in different forms of examination) the following question:

In one of the Polish universities the student government turned to the rector with a proposal that exams, consultations and assessments of students be monitored or that an independent observer would additionally participate. (press news of 2013–02–26). What, in your opinion, was the reason/reasons for such a proposal?

The research involved 403 students from the University of Szczecin. 26 people did not answer this question. Out of the remaining 377 students, 12 answered

“I don’t know” and another 8 expressed a negative opinion about this initiative (“What a sick idea, why all the fuss? It is stressful for both sides!”, “I wouldn’t go for it, I’d feel uncomfortable”, “Exams should not be monitored”). We analysed 367 responses, which included at least one reason, one argument for the monitoring of the exam situation. The openness of the questions allowed the respondents to express a personal opinion, and us to read their projections embedded in their past experience. Among these statements there were *explicit* or *implicit* references to trust. The most frequently mentioned arguments are presented in Figure 3. The opinions included in Figure 3, expressed in percent, do not add up to 100 because the respondents mentioned any, so more than one, reasons for the initiative of the student government.

Figure 3. Opinions of students about the exam supervision



As a reason for such a proposal of the student government, the participants most often pointed to their experience of injustice. According to the respondents, the supervision of examinations by independent observers (directly or through cameras and other devices) is motivated by the unfair assessment practices of teachers. “Students feel unfairly assessed”, “Unfair assessment, bad attitude of

a lecturer”, “Unfair assessment, favouring certain students”, these are just some of the examples. These and similar statements implicitly indicate a lack of trust to the examiner. Monitoring the exam could reduce the scale and repertoire of the lawlessness of academic teachers and give students a sense of security.

The second group of arguments for supervising and monitoring exams in higher education institutions are those which explicitly indicate a lack of trust in exam interactions. The following are examples of the respondents’ answers: “Students do not trust the lecturers,” “Students were not sure about the fairness in their work assessment. They definitely did not trust their lecturers,” “They did not trust lecturers or they were inadequately assessed,” “Lack of mutual trust in each other, lecturers and students,” “The reason was the lack of trust in lecturers,” “Due to the lack of trust in the lecturer and in his reliability,” “Lack of trust”.

In this group of arguments there were also statements indicating suspicion towards examiners: “Surely academic teachers gave credit for nothing,” “Teachers do not always assess the student’s knowledge, but also what he/she does, how he/she looks, how he/she dresses.”

The analysis of this group of arguments indicates the importance- in the opinion of the students- of subjective trust in direct and indirect educational interactions. It includes interpersonal and social trust, i.e., between the individual participants in interaction (student- academic teacher, student- student) and social groups (students- teachers). It may be mutual (horizontal) or unilateral (vertical, bearing signs of a paternalistic or naive relationship).

The third group of arguments justifying the exam panopticon are statements indicating the valuation of objectivity, trust in the role of an objective observer: “Because an independent observer would be objective,” “Because an observer could objectively assess our knowledge and approach of a lecturer to a student.”

According to the respondents, supervising examinations may limit unfair, unethical behaviour, such as cheating, using previously prepared material, etc. They pointed out examples of such behaviour: “It is highly possible that some students took the exam unfairly, contrary to the rules, e.g., they used electronic devices, such as tablets, cell phones, etc.,” “Maybe the students cheated as a routine,” “Perhaps the students used the Internet on the phone during classes “. In the students’ opinions it is possible to make a statement that limiting such behaviour can be done by control and supervision. These activities will also guarantee security in the event of conflict between the participants in the exam.

Acceptance of direct or indirect observation is an expression of trust in the bureaucratic rules, where documenting the events is a guarantee of security:

“I think the reason for this proposal was for the exams to be documented, so in the case of ambiguity, e.g., if a student does not agree with his assessment, there is going to be a witness,” “Checking university staff.”

The respondents' views on the initiative of the student government on a new form of panopticon in academic life reveal the scale and strength of the experience of distrust in others and expectations of axiological trust, which is ethical conduct of other participants in the exam situation.

Concluding remarks

What is alarming are arguments accepting exam supervision. They reflect the personal experiences of distrust and suspicion in the cases of examination (“In some situations there could be an independent observer because some lecturers make unfair assessment that is inappropriate to a student,” “In my opinion it is worth considering this idea, because during exams teachers are not objective and rely on their private sympathy,” “Because students are not assessed fairly in accordance with the acquired knowledge,” “With an independent observer all the examinations were held fairly and honestly,” “An independent observer might notice other relevant facts,” “Because an independent observer would be objective”). On the other hand, it may be the effect of the universality of “the eye of Big Brother”, cameras and other monitoring devices, modern panopticons, and common acceptance of being watched. Since the driving test is recorded, why could not the university exam be supervised as well?

These arguments reveal the strength and scale of trust in supervision, checking and controlling. The situation will be fair and honest, only when somebody is going to watch. This position is worrying from the point of view of the objectives of academic education, which despite its mass nature, aims at generating elite- not only intellectual one (if this is at all possible in the light of such high enrolment rates) but also moral elite – people, who are involved, guided in their actions by honesty, inspiring social trust (according to Piotr Sztompka, it is an expectation towards social categories, groups and social roles, regardless of the individual characteristics of specific individuals, 2007, p. 148).

Exam in a higher education institution is one of the elements of the educational process. It is another type of educational interaction. Experiencing participants' mutual trust in this interaction is an important factor in shaping the culture of trust in higher education, which thanks to its mass nature has a chance to spread

throughout the culture of trust in society. The above opinions on the introduction of supervisory tools to assessment procedures raise a thought of perpetuating distrust and suspicion in social relations.

Higher education institutions operate in a specific social and axiological context. Poland is not a country with a high level of trust. This has been shown, e.g., in the public opinion polls (e.g., *Zaufanie społeczne [Social trust]*, CBOS, Warsaw 2012) and reports prepared as part of the next edition of the *Social Diagnosis* and *World Values Survey*. Mass academic education could change trust in society. However, these are experiences and patterns of everyday life that enter universities, rather than the other way round. They are compounded by the anonymity of the participants in the educational process. Students do not know or even recognize each other. In a lecture hall with 200 or more people, it is difficult to take a close look at others who are in the same room, not to mention to get to know them. This starts the mechanisms of trust towards strangers. The lecture hall takes on the attributes of a public space in which strangers meet. And every third Pole declares trust in them (*Zaufanie społeczne [Social trust]* CBOS 2012), while nearly 50% do not trust strangers. Among the socio-professional groups the most distrustful one, next to unskilled workers and farmers, are pupils and students. This presents new challenges to higher education institutions. They are associated with the formation of openness and criticality to the daily and ceremonial life, to tradition and innovation, to comfort and challenges. And this is of particular importance in the case of such high academic enrolment rates.

Our search for the conditions of development of a culture of trust focused on the analysis of educational interactions, which use digital media to identify the specific experiences of the participants in these interactions in different cultures. In our research an emphasis is put on exploring relations based on trust at each stage of the process of education and learning. An inseparable link in this process is the exam and it takes on new dimensions in the case of the mass nature of academic education.

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