

Between academic freedom and corporation. Apparent actions in Polish Academia

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Abstract

This article critically examines the current state of Polish academia, influenced by a shift from a traditional academic ethos toward a corporative one (Sztompka, 2015). We focus on how key values such as academic freedom and university autonomy are increasingly undermined by neoliberal changes in higher education. Political pressures remain evident. Using Jan Lutyński's (1977) concept of "apparent actions," we analyze how universities simulate advocacy of scholarly values—such as the safeguarding of academic freedom and ensuring quality—while pursuing bureaucratic and managerial objectives. We specifically analyze two components: the fetishization of points in institutional and individual evaluation, and the implementation of learning outcomes. These practices mirror private-sector audit culture and are often modeled on better-funded Anglo-Saxon systems. This shift has led to the marginalization of academia's edifying mission. Teaching, is deprioritized in favor of research metrics, often assessed based on international, English-language publications. We argue that these developments create the illusion of progress while eroding the core values of higher education.

Keywords

Academia, higher education, academic freedom, pointosis, corporate ethos, apparent actions, Poland.

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Introduction

In recent decades, Polish public universities—referred to here as academia—have been caught between two competing logics: the traditional academic ethos and the increasingly dominant corporate model. Drawing on Robert Merton's (1973: 268-269) "ethos of science," Piotr Sztompka (2015) described it as a normative system guiding the conduct of scholars, and emphasizing values such as the pursuit of truth, academic freedom, methodological rigor, intellectual honesty, collegiality, and public responsibility. Scholarship, from this perspective, is more than a profession: it is a moral vocation rooted in social trust, intrinsic motivation, intellectual curiosity, and the sense of a social mission.

That notwithstanding, Sztompka observed that this value system has undergone significant transformations in Poland, challenging the academic community. There has been a progressive shift from the classic academic model to a corporate one closely linked to neo-liberalization processes in higher education (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Shore & Wright, 2015). In a trend reflected globally, universities function more like commercial enterprises, with scholarly careers driven by competitiveness, individual achievement, instrumentality, and bureaucratic evaluation. Consequently, academia has increasingly internalized an audit culture logic (Strathern, 2000; Power, 1997), favoring metrics such as publication and institutional rankings. The persistent pressure of neoliberal rules is one threat facing academia in Poland today; another stems from alignment between the universities and a specific political agenda—particularly evident under the 2015-2023 Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS*) government (Piotrowska, Szkurłat & Szydłowska, 2025).

Our critical perspective stems from the classic academic values in which we were educated in and from our academic work experience navigating a higher education environment shaped by neoliberal reforms. Among those values, academic freedom has always been central to us—not only meaning institutional autonomy, but also as a symbol of freedom of thought, democratic engagement, and political independence. In 2018, when scholars and students at different Polish universities protested the new Law on Higher Education and Science (the so-called "Act 2.0" or, as the government called it, the "Constitution for Science"), core concerns were academic freedom and institutional autonomy, which were being especially challenged by increasingly rigid evaluation criteria. One of the authors was directly involved in these protests.

In this article, we apply Jan Lutyński's (1977, 1978) concept of "apparent actions" (działania pozorne)³ to argue that many contemporary academic practices merely simulate the attainment of certain goals (e.g., academic freedom or research excellence). These practices serve primarily the procedural demands of formal evaluation, but not the gaining of substantive results (Czyżewski, 2009b; Jaskuła, 2019). We focus on two examples of this phenomenon: the "fetishization of points" (pointosis or punktoza in Polish, a colloquialism meaning "point-chasing disease") in individual and institutional academic evaluation (whereby merit is chiefly measured by points awarded for publications in high-ranking journals), and the implementation of learning outcomes (a bureaucratic requirement in teaching). We claim that the hybridization of governance models in Polish academia has produced structural ambivalence, undermining both established academic values and the coherence of recent reforms.

1. Brief characteristics of the Higher Education Sector in Poland

As of 2023, Poland had 362 higher education institutions (HEIs): 211 non-public, 135 public and 16 church-run (POL-on, 2024).⁴ These institutions enrolled 1.25 million students (a 1.8% increase over 2022), with over 70% studying at public universities (GUS, 2024a; POL-on, 2024). It is worth noting that, relative to the population aged 19–24, the proportion of individuals enrolled in higher education has also been increasing. In 2022, this ratio stood at 56.3%, rising to 58.2% in 2023 (GUS, 2024b).

Public HEIs receive about 67% of their revenue from the government, while private ones receive around 10% (GUS, 2023). The Ministry of Science and Higher Education⁵ also allocates funds through designated programs, while its discrete agencies—e.g., the National Science Centre (Narodowe Centrum Nauki) and National Centre for Research and Development (Narodowe Centrum Badań i Rozwoju)—provide competitive, merit-based grants, often involving international collaboration. Private funding from businesses or foundations remains minimal. Teaching quality and curricula

³ Used herein for Lutyński's concept will be "apparent actions"—not "apparent activities" as appeared in a 1978 translation—because more recent publications apply the former more commonly. Here "apparent" (*pozorne*) is used in the sense of superficial, ostensible or feigned.

⁴ All three categories declined in number over the past decade; data as of December 31, 2023

⁵ Under the PiS government, the Ministries of Education and of Science and Higher Education were combined into a single entity; currently, they are again separated.

are evaluated by the Polish Accreditation Committee (Polska Komisja Akredytacyjna), an expert body under the ministry's auspices, which conducts regular on-site reviews of academic programs at both public and private HEIs.

Academic advancement is overseen by the Council of Academic Excellence (Rada Doskonałości Naukowej), elected by the academic community. The typical career path in Poland includes a PhD, habilitation, university professorship, and, ultimately, full professorship, conferred by the President of Poland upon the Council's recommendation. The process of awarding academic titles is relatively convoluted, involving coordination between universities and national executive bodies (Kwiek & Szadkowski, 2018).

Academic salaries in the public sector are set by law. In 2025, the minimum monthly salary for a full professor was PLN 9,370 (approximately EUR 2,193) vis-à-vis an assistant professor's (with PhD) PLN 6,840 (approximately EUR 1,600). For comparison's sake, the national average salary in the first quarter of 2025 was PLN 8,962 (approximately EUR 2,097), and the median salary was PLN 6,842 (approximately EUR 1,601) (GUS, 2025). Poland's higher education system has been described as resistant to reform (Antonowicz, Kulczycki & Budzanowska, 2020), currently operating under a model that blends academic autonomy with significant state oversight.

2. Towards a Corporate Ethos of Polish Science

Since the fall of communism in 1989, Polish higher education has undergone gradual neoliberal reforms, modelled on solutions adopted in other European countries. These reforms progressively introduced elements of corporate governance into academic institutions, such as enhanced managerial authority, performance-based assessment, stronger accountability mechanisms, market-driven resource allocation, strategic planning, and an increased emphasis on efficiency, competitiveness, and financial viability. A major milestone was the legislative overhaul initiated by Barbara Kudrycka, the Minister of Science and Higher Education from 2007 to 2013. Her reforms were underpinned by criticism of Poland's institutional model for higher education as expressed by international agencies (Antonowicz, 2016). For instance, a 2004 World Bank and European Investment Bank report described the Polish governance of higher education as outdated and inefficient, recommending organizational and financial

restructuring to align with transnational standards (World Bank/EIB, 2004).⁶ This diagnosis, along with Poland's low position in global rankings, justified reforms in the academic sector that aligned with the principles of New Public Management (NPM)—a model of public administration designed to improve efficiency, transparency, and accountability in public institutions (including universities) through private-sector management practices.

Kudrycka's reforms—the greater part of which came into force on October 1, 2011—generally refer to amendments made to the core Law on Higher Education and over a dozen other legal acts (e.g., the Law on Financing Science). The modifications focused on: 1) management of tertiary education institutions (e.g., distinguishing flagship universities); 2) the academic career model (e.g., introducing a system of evaluation of scholastic achievements based on relevant international databases); 3) financing of tertiary education (e.g., introducing a system of external grants); and 4) didactics (e.g., adapting study programs and accreditation methods to the requirements of the European Higher Education Area). While the revamping affected the entire higher education system, our primary interest here lies in those modifications that have been particularly significant for the social sciences and humanities.

One of the key elements in these reforms was the change in how research is financed—introducing a new grant distribution model based on expert assessment and criteria such as efficiency, measurable results, and economic utility. They also promoted commercialization of research to support economic development, keeping the concept of a knowledge-based economy in mind. In this context, the National Centre for Research and Development was established in 2007 to support applied research (i.e., projects in cooperation with the business sector), and the National Science Centre established in 2010 to fund 'basic research'. Further changes involved new methods for the evaluation of academic units as well as individual scholars, giving more weight in career promotion procedures to publications in journals indexed in international databases (e.g., Scopus, Web of Science) and to international experience.

⁶ The Report of the Polish Tertiary Education System was undertaken by the World Bank and the European Investment Bank in consultation with the then Ministry of Education and Sports of Poland. However, no international organizations were involved in the actual reform.

The didactics-related elements of these reforms emphasized both international standards on the one hand, and market needs on the other. The National Qualifications Framework (Krajowe Ramy Kwalifikacji) aligned with the European Qualifications Framework in introducing a system for the description of academic learning outcomes. The Polish Accreditation Committee was granted greater authority to evaluate study programs based on learning outcomes and the assessment of HEI units. The aim was not only to enhance educational quality and efficiency, but also to optimize funding by prioritizing high-performing hubs (Antonowicz, 2016). For this purpose, a system of National Leading Scientific Centres (Krajowe Naukowe Ośrodki Wiodące) was introduced, to provide additional financing to 25 leading universities, including all the faculties which are part of these institutions, and research centers. Consequently, Kudrycka's reforms increased competition for funding both among institutions and individual scholars, initiating the transformation of universities along corporate lines (Deem, 2001).

These reforms sparked heated debate, dividing the academic community into supporters of the corporate ethos and defenders of the traditional academic one rooted in the university's public mission. One of the most vocal opponents was the Crisis Committee for the Humanities,⁷ which, in 2015, presented demands for systemic changes in higher education and initiated numerous protests—such as the “Black Procession of Academia” (czarna procesja nauki; Dziedziczak-Foltyn, 2015)—against the body of reforms. Resistance to that program of reforms reflected not only distrust in government policy, but also broader unease about shifts in academia itself. This backlash limited the implementation of certain changes, particularly those pertaining to career advancement and the structure of university governance (Antonowicz, Kulczycki & Budzanowka, 2020).

The ministry under Barbara Kudrycka has been accused of introducing an audit culture into the Polish tertiary education system. The reforms are seen as 1) subordinating scholarly activity to rigorous evaluation based on quantitative indicators and a sprawling bureaucracy (Grzymski, 2017); 2) centralizing higher education management at the expense of institutional autonomy; 3) neglecting the specificity of the humanities

⁷ This association was set up in 2013 by a group of doctoral students and scholars. One of the founders was Aleksander Temkin—an activist, philosopher, and PhD candidate, who was subsequently also a leader of the 2018 protest against the Act 2.0.

(Szenajch, 2012), and 4) subordinating academia to market logic and neoliberal patterns of management, including the deference of research objectives to market needs (Bieliński & Tomczyńska, 2019). Drawing disapproval was a correlation between HEI funding and the number of students enrolled in a department as well as the introduction of fees for a second field of study: this, according to critics, would have led to the pauperization of certain fields such as philosophy. The Polish humanities community drew attention to these issues in three open letters (including the Open Letter of Culture Studies and Culture Researchers) to the then Minister of Science and Higher Education, Lena Kolarska-Bobińska who inherited the position in a cabinet reshuffling at the turn of 2013 and 2014.

According to Piotr Sztompka (2015), the changes eroded traditional academic values, distorted scholarly identity, weakened the communal aspect of academic work in the service of society, and marginalized teaching in favor of publishing (especially in English-language, high-impact factor journals). However, it was not only the proponents of the academic ethos who were dissatisfied with the effect of these reforms, but also the supporters of the reforms (Woźnicki, 2013). For example, advocates of the corporate ethos pointed to inadequate funding for science and the academic community's lack of support for the reform package (Antonowicz et al., 2016; Kwiek, 2017).

In 2016, the next Minister of Science and Higher Education, Jarosław Gowin announced work on a new structural reform of higher education, the “Constitution for Science.” Unlike the preceding government’s program, which had been imposed on scholars by politicians, the Constitution for Science envisioned—following Western European models (Antonowicz, Kulczycki & Budzanowka, 2020)—that major stakeholders from the academic community would be involved in its preparation.⁸ According to Agnieszka Dziedziczak-Foltyn (2018), the author of the expert opinion assessing the effects of the draft, Act 2.0 had three main goals: 1) increasing the quality of scholarly research (scientific excellence); 2) increasing the quality of education (educational excellence); and 3) increasing the social position of the higher education sector through its contribution to the development of social culture and an innovative economy (social responsibility).

⁸ Three research teams worked on this. In addition to preparing a draft proposal, the teams were to provide feedback from the academic community for that project.

Act 2.0⁹ significantly altered university governance, expanding the authority of rectors (university presidents) in line with the managerial functions found in corporate structures (Kwiek, 2021; Drygas, 2020). This weakened collegial bodies and faculty autonomy in favor of centralized university-level management. Though intended to improve strategic effectiveness, this model limited participatory mechanisms in institutional checks and balances.¹⁰ Other modifications reinforced the significance of 1) internationalization (i.e., active engagement with the global academic community by, for example, fostering international research collaboration and publishing research findings in international journals) as well as 2) parameterization (i.e., point-based evaluation of academic achievements). These two aspects became the basis for institutional and individual advancement decisions, further embedding a corporate ethos that mirrors market logic (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

Currently, standardized performance criteria (e.g., publications, citations, grants won, international collaboration, commercialization of research results, etc.) have intensified competition within the academic environment. This exerts pressure on productivity as quantified, for instance, by the number of points assigned to specific publications (Shore & Wright, 2015); in such a system, the scholar becomes a “knowledge worker” whose status depends on measurable achievements. A consequence of these changes is the expansion of academic capitalism—i.e., the social and financial pressures that influence institutional decisions (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). That, in turn, is associated with the reconstruction of the axiological foundations of universities. The key values of the traditional academic ethos—i.e., truth seeking, collegiality, academic freedom—are being supplanted by productivity, efficiency, competitiveness, and subordination to economic and ranking goals.

3. Apparent actions: The framework

One of Lutynski’s main interests was the specific nature of “real socialism” (see Cox, 1991: 177–183) in Poland, including its origins and functioning mechanisms. He wrote about “apparent actions,” which he considered characteristic of Poland’s political system

⁹ Since the 2018 Act on Higher Education and Science entered into force (October 1, 2018), it has been amended many times (Bucholc, 2022 noted 18 amendments of the Act).

¹⁰ Although Act 2.0 introduced university councils—which, among other things, were to elect the rector—their actual control function is limited.

at the time. Although this concept was developed for the purpose of analyzing an undemocratic form of government, it has also been applied to describe democratic society. With respect to academia, Bartłomiej Przybylski and Paweł Żuk (2009) have looked at student organizations, whereas Jaskuła (2019) looked at evaluations of HEIs; in other contexts, Agnieszka Ziętek (2020) focused on civic culture.

Apparent actions have several basic characteristics: 1) they are officially recognized as important for the realization of a socially significant goal; 2) they are performed, but do not actually realize that goal; 3) their uselessness is widely known in a particular social group; 4) yet this is confidential knowledge, not officially verbalized; 5) their real function lies in their very existence; and 6) they always contain some element of fiction with reference to their direction or purpose. Lutyński also identified two mechanisms fostering the emergence of apparent actions in a centralized system. First is the mechanism of compulsory execution of non-vital regulations, which is triggered by the growth of protocols and provisions that go hand in hand with the expansion and bureaucratization of various divisions of the political apparatus and all governmental activities. Second is the “purportedly pragmatic” mechanism that triggers apparent actions organized by the authorities and declaratively aimed at solving a socially urgent problem. Lutyński argued that apparent actions have socially negative consequences: they weaken social ties, erode trust in the managers of social life, reduce prosocial motivations, foster indifference to social problems and broader issues, lower society’s morale, and ossify value systems. Though they may offer initial stability, it is usually short-lived.

Marek Czyżewski (2009a) noted the persistence of apparent actions in Polish society, even if their mechanisms and roles have evolved. He examined them in science and higher education, highlighting harmful practices in research, academic publishing, and mass education. Another sphere incorporating apparent actions has been, according to Czyżewski, mass media, journalism, and the public debate. His analyses and reflections led him to create a new term -“neo-apparent” actions- referring to deeds that despite being objectively useless or even harmful, are nevertheless widely perceived (both privately and publicly) as possessing at least a minimal degree of usefulness. Awareness of the ineffectiveness or even detrimental nature of such actions is not universally shared; revelations frequently become a matter of public controversy. In this article -in line with Czyżewski’s remarks about the different nature of apparent actions in contemporary society- we apply this concept as an interpretive framework in order to analyze scientific and didactic aspects in Polish academia.

4. Academic freedom or apparent academic freedom?

Academic freedom may be considered as a broad prerogative under which a scholar is able to maintain control over the research process, no matter the type of client for whom the research is being conducted. This can mean that, when conducting participatory research as public sociologists, we may find ourselves in a position where we willingly relinquish (to a greater or lesser degree) some of our academic freedom (Mesny, 2012). We, however, follow a narrower understanding, one more common among Polish scholars: freedom from state intervention in both scholarly research and didactic programs. In Poland, this notion is shaped by systemic structures and historical context. Yet the instability of legal regulations governing HEIs raises questions about whether academic freedom remains a genuine value or has become part of an “apparent” university autonomy¹¹ (cf. Ostrowicka, Spychalska-Stasiak & Stankiewicz, 2020 about the “dispositif” of the reform). As discussed in the section above, Polish higher education has undergone continuous reform, marked by a neoliberal turn that has been sustained by successive governments.

As of 2015, political interference in academic freedom -for ideological, religious, or worldview-based reasons- has aligned with nationalist-conservative political agendas. Such interventions became more frequent than at any time since 1989 (Koper et al., 2020).¹² Under the Law and Justice government, academic freedom deteriorated (Bucholc, 2022) as the education and science minister often exercised direct control. Decisions were made pursuant to political aims or the logic of amoral familism, characterized (inter alia) by the dominance of informal, private sphere connections; the result was a clear divide between insiders and outsiders, an ethical dualism, and the

¹¹ University autonomy is broader than academic freedom (i.e., freedom of research, discussion, teaching, etc.). Such autonomy encompasses self-governance, independence in decision-making regarding educational and research activities, and campus integrity (i.e., public order forces may enter HEI premises only at the rector's request or in cases of imminent threat to life or a natural disaster) (cf. Bucholc, 2022, Karran, 2009). This is constitutionally guaranteed in Poland as explicated later in this text.

¹² A few examples are provided in section 4.1. Serving as additional illustrations are: 1) the 2018 reform elevating theology from simply a humanities discipline to the status of one of the eight principal fields of the arts and sciences, leading to the appointment and greater influence of theologians on expert advisory boards; 2) the ministry's list of approved publishers came to include non-academic Roman Catholic ones; 3) the ministry's list of approved periodicals with their assigned points has had a significantly negative effect on the evaluation of research concerning Polish culture, society, and language (key areas for the humanities and social sciences); and 4) another controversy apropos the “points” system was a competition concluding in March 2019 whose outcome was the awarding of supplementary financial support. Among the successful publications, the ministry included at least twenty-one Catholic theological journals without specifying the applied assessment criteria; this prompted some to question the legitimacy of subsidy allocations through such a contest (Koper et.al. 2020).

inability to act on behalf of broader communities (Tarkowska & Tarkowski, 2016; Pasamonik, 2024).

As of this writing, a center-left government led by the Civic Coalition (Koalicja Obywatelska, KO) has been in power since October 15, 2023. Still, promised changes - such as revision of the evaluation criteria, an overhaul of the high-point periodical list, and increased university funding- have not been implemented.¹³ The only notable action has been the dismissal of the minister of higher education and science after a nepotism scandal.

The primary challenges to academic freedom in Poland today are anchored in two strategic realms. Firstly, universities are increasingly being aligned with a political vision for the Polish state: under the PiS government a monocultural vision of national identity was propagated, whereas now, under KO, a different one that underscores multiculturality is promoted (Bucholc, 2022). Secondly, the persistence of a neoliberal approach to managing higher education, introduced in the first two decades of the 21st century, remains a significant factor (Grzymski, 2017; Bucholc, 2022). These two are therefore very similar to domains observed as problematic in other countries (UK-Traianou, 2015 and Fleming, 2021; Hungary-Koper et al., 2020; Australia-Rhodes, 2017). Nevertheless, it seems that the political domain is more influential in Central-Eastern European countries, whereas the neoliberal approach is distorting institutions in the West more severely. Nonetheless, countries like Poland continue to race to meet neoliberal standards.

A lot depends on how resilient HEIs are to these dual pressures. However, a combination of neoliberal management, national-conservative ideological waves, and the almost complete economic dependence of leading Polish universities on the state situates HEIs in a constant and sometimes contradictory struggle to preserve their freedom and autonomy.

From a legal standpoint, the autonomy of HEIs is guaranteed by the Polish constitution (Art. 70 Sec. 5 of the Constitution, concerning the right to education as one of the economic, social, and cultural rights), although this mostly pertains to the teaching process (Łętowska, 2021). Art. 73 of the Constitution states that “The freedom of artistic

¹³ Between 23rd July and 1st August 2025 (during the middle of the academic summer break), the Ministry of Science and Higher Education held online consultations on the evaluation of the quality of scientific activity. Around 3,500 experts and representatives of various academic communities took part in five online meetings. The ministry proposed a fourth criterion for evaluation (in addition to the three existing ones: scientific activity, financial effects of research, and impact on society and the economy), focusing on professional development and the creation of a good workplace environment in academia. The details, however, are not yet known.

creation and scientific research as well as dissemination of the fruits thereof, the freedom to teach and to enjoy the products of culture, shall be ensured to everyone.” This means that the freedom to do research and freely disseminate its results are secured. The 2018 Act 2.0 further affirms that universities and scholars have the right to conduct research and teach without obstruction, and that academic institutions should operate autonomously, but concurrently uphold high standards. That law also tasks universities with the supporting of national goals -e.g., economic development, cultural advancement, and the shaping of ethical values.

4.1 Political Pressure and Academic Freedom

Nonetheless, constitutional protection proved insufficient under the previous government: legal regulations were unlawfully challenged, and academics were ostracized or accused of wrongdoing simply because their research did not fall within the national-conservative understanding of an appropriate topic (for example: role of the catholic church and religion; history of Poland and national identity -“cursed soldiers”¹⁴, Polish nation martyrology; family studies- traditional role of the family) or because they openly disagreed with the government.

A few cases illustrate this well. Although it should have been mere formality in 2019, Michał Bilewicz’s full professorship was not ratified by President Andrzej Duda (a PiS politician); in fact, the renowned scholar still awaits a presidential decision (the newly elected president, Karol Nawrocki, also supported by PiS, has been in office since 6th August 2025). Several observers argue that the president’s flouting of procedure was driven by the fact that Bilewicz’s research topics (e.g., antisemitism, prejudices, minorities, Poles’ role in the Holocaust etc.) and findings conflict with the Law and Justice party’s jingoism (Scholars at Risk, 2022). The president has claimed that he refused to sign off on Bilewicz’s appointment because too many of the reviewers were from Bilewicz’s university.

Another case - the Polish Academy of Science (Polska Akademia Nauk, PAN) was pressured into compliance by financial decisions and/or the creation of other

¹⁴ The term *cursed soldiers* (Polish: *żołnierze wyklęci*) refers to members of the armed anti-communist underground operating in Poland after the Second World War. This underground movement was active between 1944 and 1953, engaging in armed operations and intelligence activities. After 1953, only small groups of partisans remained, focusing primarily on survival; the last partisan was killed in 1963. The term itself was coined and has been used predominantly by right-wing circles to glorify these partisans, many of whom are regarded by others as bandits. For a discussion of the origins of the concept of the *cursed soldiers* and its role in Polish memory politics (see: Jaskułowski & Majewski, 2025).

institutions—like the Copernican Academy (Akademia Kopernikańska), whose mission overlapped with PAN’s thus threatening the latter with loss of funding.¹⁵ Finally, the Holocaust scholars, Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski, were (albeit unsuccessfully) sued by a man’s niece for slandering her uncle, implicating him in the death of Jews hiding in a forest. The lawsuit, supported by both Reduta Dobrego Imienia (an antidefamation league) and the then-ruling PiS government, sought compensation of one hundred thousand PLN and public apology. Although a lower court ruled partially against the scholars (only requiring the apology), that decision was overturned on appeal, affirming that “interference in scientific research is not a task for the courts” (Klauziński, 2021; Szymczak, 2021).

4.2 Managerial Pressure and Academic Freedom

The increasing internationalization of Polish academia is evident in changes to the publication evaluation scheme, in which greater emphasis is placed on English-language articles indexed in international databases. This shift has sparked criticism, with some viewing it as an overly imitative approach to global academic standards. Over time, the emphasis on publishing in English -especially given uneven possibilities across disciplines to meet this demand- may influence researchers’ selections, potentially steering them away from Polish-language and particularly domestic journals. Concerns that have emerged since the 2018 reform highlight the broader conflict between the drive toward international visibility and the preservation of national academic traditions—as well as growing worries about academic freedom.

We perceive these managerial pressures as particularly damaging, because -as became evident under the previous government- such organization of the HEI system would be susceptible to political and ideological manipulation. Presented below are two cases of systemic procedures analyzed through the lens of “apparent actions.”

4.2.1. *The case of quantitative assessment: The fetishization of points in institutional and individual evaluation*

Evaluation of the work of scholars is an institutionalized process of methodically assessing academic institutions and individual researchers in terms of the quality and efficacy of their research output. In Poland, such evaluations are conducted cyclically (every four years) by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education. The ministry calls

¹⁵ The current, KO government has decided to liquidate the Copernican Academy (RMF24.pl 2025).

into being a new Research Evaluation Commission (Komisja Ewaluacji Nauki) that, in fulfilling its mission, will apply a “parametric assessment”—i.e., an approach based on numerical markers and fixed specifications). The outcomes of this evaluation have serious institutional consequences: they determine the level of public funding allocated to a given unit, its rights to confer academic degrees (PhD and higher academic titles), and its standing within the tertiary education system. At many universities, institutional evaluation is linked to the individual assessment of academic staff (Kulikowski & Antipow, 2020). The results of these periodic assessments influence decisions on the extension of employment contracts, and, in some cases, promotion. As we argue further, the appraisals of HEI productivity and quality in Poland can be interpreted as an apparent action in the sense defined by Lutyński.

Firstly, in accordance with the logic of audit culture, evaluations of academic work in Poland aim to enhance research efficiency and scientific excellence, thus heightening the international prestige of Polish academia. Here efficiency is understood as the socioeconomic impact of research, while excellence refers to the high quality of academic publications (Kulczycki, 2017; Kulikowski & Antipow, 2020). As such, the assessment functions as a core mechanism for supporting scientific development, thereby meeting the first criterion of apparent actions: it is officially recognized as serving a socially significant goal. At the same time, evaluation policies indirectly affect academic freedom by steering the thinking and behavior of scholars toward practices deemed desirable from the perspective of neoliberal objectives.

Secondly, the evaluation process is largely superficial, as it fails to achieve its declared goals in practice. A key reason for this is the prioritization of quantity over quality in research assessment, driven by the “fetishization of metrics” (Hicks et al., 2015). Appraisals at universities focus on general academic disciplines (e.g., chemistry, sociology, philology, etc.), and three criteria: 1) the financial outcomes of research and development, 2) the impact of scientific activity on society and the economy, and 3) scientific or artistic quality.¹⁶ For our purposes, we will concentrate on the last criterion, measured by the total points awarded for publications. A similar logic governs the periodic evaluation of individual scholars: at this level, too, both the number of publications and the point values of the periodicals significantly impact the final

¹⁶ The weight of each criterion in the evaluation depends on the academic discipline being assessed. The sum of points amassed from the three criteria earns a university discipline under assessment one of five possible marks: A+ (the highest, leading level), A, B+, B, or C (the lowest, does not meet the criteria).

evaluation. The ministry, in collaboration with appointed experts, assigns point values (20, 40, 70, 100, 140, 200) to periodicals and publications in books. Key for HEIs is that when researchers publish in a listed, highly ranked journal, their institution receives the corresponding number of points in its evaluation.

From our perspective, sole reliance on the number of points as a measure of the quality of a publication, a tertiary education institution, or individual scholar is incompatible with academia and impinges upon academic freedom. Given the mechanisms used in such evaluations, the point value earned depends primarily on the number of points allocated to the journal in which an article appears, rather than the substantive quality of the research itself (Kulikowski, 2024).

Moreover, the system is arbitrary, based on shifting criteria, and the scale used to assess journal value—as Konrad Kulikowski and Emil Antipow (2020) note—lacks precision. The list of ranked periodicals is revised annually, meaning that points can rise or drop (even radically) from one year to the next—all while a submitted article is undergoing review. Additionally, the Minister has the authority to intervene in how points are assigned, creating the potential for misuse. One example is a decision by the PiS government’s minister, Przemysław Czarnek to award the highest possible rating (200 points) to journals ideologically aligned with the Catholic Church, such as *Pedagogika Katolicka* (Catholic Pedagogy) and *The Person and the Challenges: The Journal of Theology, Education, Canon Law and Social Studies Inspired by Pope John Paul II*. Despite their local, Polish scope, these journals were rated on a par with world-renowned publications such as *Science* or *Nature*. This mechanism rewarded publications (and authors) aligned with the political ideology of the then-ruling Law and Justice party (Piotrowska, Szkurłat & Szydłowska, 2025).

The evaluation of academic excellence in Poland is ineffective not only due to its reliance on quantitative criteria, but also because of the consequences these criteria produce. Rather than improving the quality and productivity of scholars, the current system incentivizes behavior aimed at fulfilling bureaucratic requirements. One such consequence is the phenomenon commonly referred to as “pointosis” -a practice by which authors’ publication decisions are guided by the number of points a given periodical provides, rather than by merit or aptness (Kulikowski & Antipow, 2020; see also Kulczycki, 2017).

Other apparent actions described in the literature stem from the “publish or perish” culture which has also reached Poland -practices often correlating less to high-quality

scholarship, and more to evaluation mechanisms at both institutional and individual levels (see Corneille et al., 2023; Kulczycki, 2017; Müller, 2014). One notable example is the phenomenon of “paper mills”: the mass, often mechanical, production of academic articles. This includes tactics such as “salami slicing” (fragmenting research findings into multiple publications), thematic redundancy, or publishing in so-called “predatory” or “questionable” journals -outlets that forgo rigorous peer review and primarily function as pay-to-publish channels (Brundy & Thornton, 2024). These strategies are not only ethically questionable: they actively degrade the quality of scholarly activity. A more recent manifestation of such mechanized scholarship involves the uncritical or undisclosed use of generative artificial intelligence tools in producing academic texts. The misuse of these tools further blurs the boundary between genuine scholarship and automated content production (Bin-Nashwan et al., 2023).

Thirdly, the evaluation of academic work can be seen as an apparent action, as the fetishization of points as the main criterion is now a phenomenon widely recognized within the academic community. Findings from the study How Academics Evaluate the Performance Appraisal Systems to which They Are Subjected (Jak pracownicy naukowi oceniają systemy oceny okresowej, którym podlegają) by Konrad Kulikowski, Sylwia Przytuła, and Łukasz Sułkowski (2023) -which surveyed 1,191 scholars in Poland- show that respondents perceive academic appraisal criteria to be largely based on the ministerial points awarded for publications. According to the respondents, the points total is important for their supervisors in assessing achievements (79.3%), though not necessarily for the researchers themselves when reflecting on the value of their own academic work (49.2% stated that points were not important to them personally).

Fourthly, the legitimacy of the point-based evaluation system is rarely discussed openly, beyond private conversations (cf. Grymski, 2017; Kulczycki, 2017; Kulikowski & Antipow, 2020; Kulikowski, 2024). The above-cited findings by Kulikowski, Przytuła, and Sułkowski (2023) suggest that a segment of the academic community has either quietly adapted to systemic requirements -though not necessarily endorsing them—or actively supports such mechanisms. The backing of neoliberal reforms by some scholars may serve as an indication supporting this interpretation.

Fifthly, many scholars -including us- adjust to these systemic requirements, often taking the number of points into account when devising their publication strategies. However, our skepticism toward the use of bibliometric indicators in research evaluation does not imply a complete rejection of such tools. We acknowledge that there is a certain

relationship between a journal's actual (as opposed to politically constructed) reputation and the quality of the work it publishes. However—under conditions of intense academic competition, publication pressures, shifting thematic trends, and the required writing competencies tailored to English-language journals—the chances of publishing in the highest ranked social sciences periodicals do not necessarily depend solely on the excellence of the research. Points do not necessarily reflect the quality of an academic text. Additionally, the pursuit of higher evaluation scores may result in delays in research findings dissemination (potentially diminishing their relevance) and may also discourage publication in the Polish language. Both factors pose limitations on academic research freedom.

Sixthly, in our view, quantifying evaluation systems primarily serve to legitimize neoliberal transformation of academia and/or to exert control over scholars. Merely the illusion of objective, thorough appraisal and commitment to research excellence is sustained.

4.2.2. The case of learning outcomes: How bureaucracy limits the academic freedom of teaching

The concept of learning outcomes (LOs) was introduced into the Polish tertiary education system as part of the 1999 Bologna Process implementation: LOs are now a component in the Polish Qualifications Framework. The goal of the Bologna Process was to create a cohesive European Higher Education Area (EHEA) within which the general principles of university systems would correspond with one another, ensuring broad access to high-quality education and creating favorable conditions for the mobility of students, graduates, and academic staff (Chmielecka, 2013).

Achieving these goals required the introduction of specific objectives. The most important of these include: 1) establishing a system of comparable academic degrees (diplomas); 2) promoting the mobility of students and scholars, 3) ensuring broad and equal access to higher education, 4) fostering interdisciplinary education, 5) strengthening ties between the education, research, and innovation sectors, and, more significantly here, 6) cooperating on quality assurance in higher education (Chmielecka, 2013). Most of these objectives are of a macrostructural nature, however LOs do impact how scholars shape their teaching programs on the much lower level of social interactions. For this reason, we concentrate precisely on quality assurance in higher education, attempting to

demonstrate how the achievement of this particular objective is, in fact, an apparent action (or even a set of apparent actions).

Firstly, is designing LOs officially recognized as important for the realization of a socially important goal? As presented above, it has been formally affirmed by the Polish state as a necessary practice within the Polish Qualifications Framework, accepted by the ministry and implemented by universities at every degree program.

Secondly, does designing LOs actually fulfill the quality assurance goal? We claim here that it does not. Simply stating in a syllabus that a lecturer will realize an LO (whether on the level of knowledge, skills, or competencies) does not guarantee student achievement thereof. Furthermore, teachers may interpret a particular LO variously or too straightforwardly; they may find the limited list of LOs designed for a particular degree program too vague, too artificial, or too unadjusted for a specialized subject, precluding applicability in their teaching (Scott, 2011). However, didactic staff will still include such LOs in their syllabus as this is what they are expected to do by their institution. Here we can observe the mechanism of compulsory execution of nonvital regulations, thus fostering the execution of apparent actions (Lutyński 1977, 1978).

Thirdly, is the uselessness of LOs widely known in a particular social group? At least two cohorts should be considered here: academic teachers and students. Our observations and experiences show that, among academics, there is widespread denial of the necessity of LOs, which are rather treated as an imposed bureaucratic product, rather than a useful tool in didactics. This limits even more the freedom of lecturers to create a fully independent program. There are, of course, opinions highlighting the positive effects of learning outcomes for HEIs, but these are immediately faced with criticism: one online text in support of LOs quickly drew primarily critical comments, underlining lack of support for and the uselessness of the LOs (Piotrowska, 2024). What is more, according to experts, evaluation of LOs by the Polish Accreditation Commission (Polska Komisja Akredytacyjna, PKA) focus—in practice—on whether they are assigned correctly and present in syllabi. There is not much interest in how courses were designed, delivered in the classrooms, or evaluated by students (Chmielecka, 2019). There is not so much interest in the real quality of teaching and learning.

We have not found many data on what students think about LOs. Universities usually ask students to evaluate every course, but the term “learning outcome” does not appear in the rather simple surveys. Students can check the LOs in their syllabi, but, in our teaching experience, the projected outcomes are not discussed as such between

teachers and students. We may assume that the uselessness (or usefulness) of LOs is thus rather widely undefined among students. It might, therefore, be difficult for undergraduates or graduate candidates to evaluate if LOs influence the quality of teaching and learning in any way.

Fourthly, is the uselessness of LOs a private knowledge? The matter goes rather undiscussed in the mainstream media but is present in the literature of the field and professional media platforms. As stated above, there are differences in opinion among academics as to the relevance of LOs for instruction quality. Do these discussions and differences of opinion render learning outcomes important for the quality of teaching? Our response remains the same: they do not, mostly because such mentions do not change the everyday perception and application of LOs. Hence, we can claim that learning outcomes are closer to neo-apparent actions in this respect.

Fifthly, does their real function lie in their very existence? Our line of reasoning has demonstrated thus far that this is the main function of the LOs. They are there for the bureaucratic system to be able to reproduce itself: academics meet institutional expectations, institutions meet Polish Accreditation Commission's requirements, and the PAC meets ministerial and legal regulations. Both quality of teaching and academic freedom are lost somewhere along this formal path.

Sixthly, do learning outcomes bear an element of fiction with regards to their direction or purpose? Ewa Chmielecka (2019) highlights the tendency to overlook social competencies, which are often treated as second-tier LOs. She notes further that the teaching of those competencies is particularly susceptible to the risk of indoctrination—i.e., the intentional transmission of specific value systems, ideologies, or belief frameworks. This observation suggests that LOs may also fulfill the sixth condition. If one of their purposes is not improving the quality of education, but, instead, shaping young individuals according to system-preferred norms—be those norms neoliberal or, as demonstrated by the previous government, illiberal in nature, yet still reliant on the bureaucratic tools of liberalism—then the declarative functions of learning outcomes emerge as (at least partly) fictitious. If so, then, at their core, learning outcomes compromise academic freedom.

5. Conclusions

In this article we have critically examined the current state of Polish public universities, affected by a shift from a traditional academic ethos towards a corporative one. We focused on how key values such as academic freedom and university autonomy are increasingly undermined by neoliberal changes in higher education. As a prism through which to analyze this, we applied the concept of “apparent actions,” in order to show how higher education institutions simulate the fulfillment of academic goals—such as maintaining freedom and quality -while, in reality, pursuing bureaucratic and managerial objectives.

Corporate restrictions on academic freedom have also proven to be a useful mechanism of control over Polish academia during the rule of the Law and Justice (PiS) party. The points-based system allowed the minister to arbitrarily re-rank journals and to promote professors, universities, and research currents and disciplines (e.g., theology) aligned with his agenda. Instruments developed within the neoliberal framework have functioned as efficient tools in shaping the status of academic institutions according to their (dis)agreement with the party line.

The neoliberal academy, focused on quantifiable scoring, often overlooks actual scientific merit and meaningful internationalization. This article, co-authored by two academics from different institutions in Poland (evidencing collaboration) -invited by recognized scholars outside Poland (evidencing international cooperation), and published in a thematic issue among works by a team of international scholars (evidencing further international cooperation)- will earn us 10 points each, because the ministerial list currently assigns only 20 points to this journal. As we both represent the same discipline (sociology), the total points must be split. No one, however, will assess the actual scholarly value of this knowledge contribution.

Such evaluation regulations applied to scholarly work may lead to poor academic practices and the publication of low-quality content in paper mills in exchange for more points (not all Polish universities consider such practices unethical). In such competitive circumstances, the mental health and overall well-being of Poland’s academic community have surfaced as increasingly pressing issues. A recent report, based on an analysis of nearly 200 academic texts concerning psychological health and quality of life of academic community in Poland, subsidized by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, noted high levels of stress among all cohorts of scholars. With respect to subcategories, women

tended to report more psychological health and emotional issues than men; early-career scholars were also more vulnerable. Most importantly, there was a lack of social support, amplifying the distress of Polish academics. A significant percentage of the academic staff had experienced professional burnout, fueled by constant pressure to publish, teach, and secure grants (Piotrowski et al., 2024).

In dealing with persistent “pointosis” and the need to amass points for publications, the edification component of academic work is often overlooked and undervalued. Furthermore, instead of compelling academics to add pro forma learning outcomes to their syllabi, systemic solutions should be adopted that would increase the worth and recognition of actual teaching achievements in the assessment of the value of academic work.

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