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An Academic Conference as a Space for the Formation of Knowledge about Higher Education

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Abstract

The article presents the results of an analysis of Polish scientific conferences devoted to problems of higher education. The analysis focuses on two related issues: the intensity of the scientific and conference debate and its detailed subject matter. From a theoretical point of view, scientific conferences have been included as an element of the *dispositif* of the university, a discursive system that combines strong regulatory processes with interpretive multiplicity and openness (Maeße & Hamann, 2016; Angermüller, 2010). The results of the study showed: 1) a limited share of scientific conferences in the debate on the reform of higher education, 2) their thematic consolidation, and 3) formations of pedagogization, economization, metaphORIZATION and ethicalization of knowledge about the university as part of conference discourse.

Keywords: higher education reform, scientific conference, discourse analysis, *dispositif*, formation of knowledge.

Introduction

A scientific conference as an object of research is often subjected to reflection from the perspective of practices of disseminating knowledge and presenting

results of scientific work, and less often as a space for constructing knowledge and creating academic identities. Researchers interested in the specifics of scientific conferences, their social, emotional and cognitive dimensions, see in the study of this area of academic practice an important source of knowledge about the condition of science and the system of higher education. However, this interest is mostly discipline-orientated, i.e. what is sought is the importance of scientific conferences for the development of specific sciences such as psychology (Gibbons, 2012), education (for example Walford, 2011), or linguistics, or the linguistic aspects of conference-specific texts such as abstracts, papers, panel discussions are explored (see Henderson, 2015). Such a state of affairs seems unsatisfactory for researchers of higher education, who perceive scientific conferences as a special object of research, which should be reflected upon together, but irrespective of the general phenomena affecting institutions of higher education described today, such as globalization, neoliberalization, or the technologization of science and academic education (Henderson & Burford, 2017). The presented study is a response to the proposal formulated by Emily Henderson (2015) to look at the phenomenon of scientific conferences more analytically and critically as an area of constructing knowledge, which, on the one hand, represents what is „normal” for academia and, on the other hand, creates space for counter-discourses with regard to practices normalizing academic identities. It is worth adding that critical reflections in recent years have been dominated, by among other matters, the problems of monotonous conference forms (namely presentations using the Power Point program, discussion panels, and papers), gender issues and the unequal participation of women as keynote speakers, as well as issues related to unethical behaviour during conferences (Thomson et al., 2012; Henderson, 2015, 2018). Another prominent thread was the study of conferences as learning cultures and communities (for example Zuber-Skerritt, 2017).

This article focuses on the issue of conference debates of academics on topics affecting their everyday academic life, scientific and didactic work, and the organization of universities at the time of introducing neoliberal reforms of science and higher education in Poland. Following through the manifestations and effects of scientific interest in key issues for the academic milieu offers a valuable source of knowledge about the condition of the modern university. The adoption of such a position becomes justified in the light of the concept of the university which assumes its regulatory, interpretative, and intermediary role between the apparent ‘inside’ (education and science) and ‘outside’ (economy, politics, and society) (see Maeße & Hamann 2016; Angermüller,

2010). The reconceptualization of the university from the angle of the theory of discourse proposed by Jens Maeße, Julian Hamann and Johannes Angermuller draws attention to the multilayered field of discursive interactions, in which numerous delimitations, closures, and transfers between education, science, politics, economy and society occur. The university is perceived here as a specific reducing (Angermuller, 2010) or circulatory dispositif (Maeße & Hamann, 2016) which, on the one hand, produces and regulates mainly symbolic goods, which are then reinterpreted in other contexts and, on the other hand, interpretatively assimilates the resources generated outside it. From this perspective, the scientific conference is a part of the dispositif of the university, a discursive system that combines strong regulatory processes, especially those reducing the excess of acceptable and „proper” senses, with interpretive multiplicity and openness.

The article focuses on two related issues, i.e. the intensity of the scientific and conference debate on reforming science and higher education, and the subject matter of papers presented during these conference meetings.

Research Methodology

The presented studies are part of a broader research project referring to the reconstruction of a multi-dimensional knowledge-power-subject relationship in contemporary scientific discourses, focused on changes in the science and higher education sector in Poland. Reforming science and higher education in Poland after 1990 is a process of permanent changes related to the creation of the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area. Among the various axes along which this transformation in many European countries occurs, the university mission, the style of management, sources of financing, competitiveness, the role of the student and the research staff are pointed out (e.g. Kwiek, 2006; Maassen & Olsen, 2007; Kwiek & Maassen 2012; Sułkowski, 2016; Antonowicz, Kohoutek, Pinheiro & Hladchenko, 2017).

The article presents the results of the study, which deal with the problem and institutional scope of scientific conferences organized by universities and other establishments in the higher education system in the years 2011–2014, i.e. during the period of an intense public debate related to the amendment to the Act on Higher Education in Poland. In the analysed period, owing to the new legal regulations, the system of science and higher education in Poland again became the subject of animated, medially disseminated discussions, ‘again’ because the dispute about the shape of the university had been going on, with

varying intensity, since 2008, i.e. since the beginning of the neoliberal reforms in Poland (see Kwiek, 2011; Dziedziczak-Foltyn, 2017; Ostrowicka & Spychalska-Stasiak, 2017; Chomik, 2018; Ostrowicka & Stankiewicz, 2019).

The new reality of higher education institutions, the field of creating new models of academic career and academic work patterns, all of these lead to the situation in which many important questions include also the question about the quality and meaning of conference discourse at the university. The article addresses this key issue, translating it into two fundamental research questions: have the higher education and science transformations experienced by academics become the subject of discourse which has been reflected in the programmes of conferences and scientific congresses organized by universities and other establishments in the higher education system? If so, what objective regularities characterize this conference discourse?

The theoretical and analytical basis of the presented studies is the integration of elements of the Foucauldian analysis of discourse with the frequency analysis and the research perspective of *governmentality*. The first is derived from Foucault's concept of discourse as a space which is subject to special formation rules (Foucault, 1981, 2002). The epistemological understanding of discourse is of key importance here. The regularities within concepts, surfaces of emergence of the object of discourse, schemata detailing statements and instances delimiting discourse determine the formations of knowledge (cf. Foucault, 2002).

The surfaces of emergence of the object of discourse are places where certain practices become the object of knowledge and the object of interest of science. The examination of 'surface' shows where, and in what context, a certain practice appears as the object of an expression (Ostrowicka, 2015). The presented studies focus on the following questions: how do changes in the science and higher education sector emerge as the object of conference discourse, according to which schemata detailing statements is this discourse differentiated, and which concepts and vocabulary indicate this?

In turn, the research perspective derived from the concept of *governmentality* assumes a close relationship between the formation of knowledge and the transformations of power. Thus, it makes it possible to capture the relationship between educational and scientific policy and academics experiencing the reforms of higher education in Poland. Today, the category of *governmentality* is an idea quite intensively developed in the area of discursive research on higher education (Angermuller, 2010; Davis & Bansel, 2010; Ball, 2015). Thus, it is helpful in presented research because it makes it possible to link the issues of rules of conference discourse of scientists with the reform which is introduced

systemically and constructed at the intersection of these discourses with academic identity.

The empirical basis of the presented analyses were the programmes of academic conferences and congresses on issues related to the reform of higher education in Poland, which were organized by universities and other establishments in the higher education system in Poland in the years 2011–2014. Data on the conferences were collected using the archive search method (see Rapley, 2008) and obtained from the following sources:

- 1) Polish database of scientific conferences¹,
- 2) Nauka Polska [Polish Science] service²,
- 3) Ministry of Science and Higher Education³,
- 4) websites of universities and other establishments in the higher education system,
- 5) administrative units of higher education institutions (science departments).

The titles of the conferences and speeches given during the sessions are the first surface of emergence of the objective rules of discourse. Certainly, this range of data does not allow for the content of the papers, and presupposes the possibility of the occurrence of discrepancies between the subject of a speech and its content⁴. However, based on the Foucauldian notion of discourse, the analysis concerns the conference programme as a „statement” that does not occur independently⁵. Each statement, in the Foucauldian sense, introduces an entire set of rules that have formed its object, modality, concepts used by it, and the strategy to which it belongs (Foucault, 2002). The conference programme in this sense becomes a function that permeates the area of appearance, at a given time and space, of possible other statements with their specific content.

¹ <http://www.bazakonferencji.pl/index.php> (2011 - 2014) (a review of 400 subpages) - access: 2016.

² [http://www.nauka-polska.pl/dhtml/raportySearch / searchKonferencje.fs?lang=en](http://www.nauka-polska.pl/dhtml/raportySearch/searchKonferencje.fs?lang=en) - access: 09.2016; currently the site to be found at: http://nauka-polska.pl/#/home/search?_k=p9igyb - access: 10.2017.

³ data obtained from the Office of the Minister and from the website <http://www.nauka.gov.pl/patronaty/> - access: 09.2016.

⁴ Emanuel Kulczycki (2008) writes about similar consequences resulting not infrequently from the erroneous formulation of the thematic scope of the conference, which translates into the hybridity of topics.

⁵ Foucault’s „statement” is not identical with the formal structures of language, with sentences. As examples of statements, the author provides i.a. a graph, a family tree, a pyramid of population.

The performed analysis of conference programmes was of deductive and inductive nature. Beginning with the Foucauldian category of the surface of emergence of the object of discourse, we searched for the concepts that come to the fore in conference discourse, and for the patterns that indicate relationships in discourse. In the first step, the analysis showed the recurring categories on the basis of which we created a categorization key separating statements on teaching, organization of a higher education institution, relations with the milieu, and science. In the second step, we analysed the connections between concepts, i.e. their co-occurrence in the title of the paper, striving to reconstruct broader patterns organizing the statements, i.e. programmes.

In the next part, the results of the study will be presented, pointing to the thematic consolidation of the main topics of conferences, their quantitative representation, and the dominating schemata differentiating the object of conference discourse.

Formations of knowledge higher education – research results

As a result of searching databases and gathering information about conferences from the various sources indicated above, 53 national scientific conferences or congresses focused on the issues related to changes in the science and higher education sector were reached. These conferences were organized in the years 2011–2014 by schools of higher education of various types:

- 1) universities, which organized 22 conferences (41%),
- 2) universities of specified disciplines and other state higher schools: 10 conferences (19%),
- 3) private establishments in the higher education system: 13 conferences (25%),
- 4) another entity as the main organizer in cooperation with universities and other establishments in the higher education system: 8 conferences (15%).

The subject of the programmes of scientific conferences and congresses related to the reform of higher education in Poland emerges within four fairly consolidated thematic groups. These are, in the order in line with the frequency of their occurrence, didactics, organization of a university, relations of the university and other establishments in the higher education system with the milieu, and science. The consolidation mentioned above seems to be a reflection of the systemic approach to a university. From this perspective, a university is a social system the structure of which is composed of many elements. For there are various scientific, didactic, administrative, economic, cultural, and other entities

operating in it, whose activities constitute the internal functions of the university (Jaskot, 2002).

Below there are some examples of the concepts used in the titles of conference reports:

1. in the area of didactics – *NQF (National Qualifications Framework), curricula, syllabi, first-, second- and third-degree studies, foreign student internships, quality of academic education, functions and goals of higher education, modern methods and techniques of an academic teacher's work (innovations), student activity, student self-government, evaluation of lectures and classes, teacher-student dialogue, pedagogical qualifications of academic teachers;*
2. in the area of organization – *the Bologna process, local and global trends in the organization of science and higher education, university management, the rector's position, legal aspects of higher education, statutes, regulations, material support for students and doctoral students, legal status of an academic teacher, salaries, working time, holidays, intellectual property, consolidation processes, mobbing at universities;*
3. in the area of relations with the environment – *employability and the labour market, cooperation with enterprises, schools, non-governmental organizations, social functions of the university, multisectorality, internationalization in higher education, attractiveness of offers, rankings of universities, following graduates' fortunes, relations between science and the world of politics;*
4. in the area of science – *scientific and research career paths, biographies of scientists, freedom and autonomy in science, ideas, vision of the university, crisis of humanities, the financing of science, management of scientific research, ethics of science, ethics of scientists, mobility of scientists, evaluation of scientific achievements.*

573 presentations in the form of presented papers or research reports comprised the programmes of all the conferences or congresses. The largest part of the titles concerned issues related to didactics (43% of topics), followed by issues of the organization of a university and changes in this area (20% of topics), and, to a slightly lesser extent, issues regarding the relationship between a university and more widely understood milieu (18% of topics). The speakers giving their presentations during the conferences and congresses related to the reform and changes in higher education paid the least attention to the field of science, compared to the remaining thematic groups singled out (16% of speeches).

In the context of this data pointing to the asymmetry and deficiency of topics especially in the field of science, it is worth recalling the words of Barbara

Kudrycka, Minister of Science and Higher Education, in the preface to the ministerial document on the reform of higher education in 2011:

The reform of higher education, which we introduce today thanks to the efforts of the entire academic community, begins a new, breakthrough chapter in the history of Polish universities. More than ever before, they open up to the need to significantly improve the quality of Polish diplomas and the level of education of the young generation of Poles, the need for modern management and effective competition in research, but also the need to strengthen the academic ethos and constant concern for the master-apprentice relationship that must remain the foundation of education (Ministry of Science and Higher Education, 2011).

If both science and didactics, as well as organization of a university and its relations with the environment were equally important in the intention of the authors of the reform of higher education in 2011, one would expect that it would find its symmetrical reflection in the disputes of academics held in the subsequent years during scientific conferences. The significant deficit of topics in the field of science is particularly meaningful. For following the thought of Michel Foucault (2005), we can assume that it is primarily our own testimony that makes the truth credible. A question arises here: is it not the academics who are most entitled to reflect on science, its context and future? Is scientific discourse not the main instance that expresses 'the truth' about the university? The above questions must remain unresolved in this place; we will return to them at the end of the article.

Returning to the analysis of thematic threads, let us add that although the majority of the analysed topics of conference presentations concern one thematic group (marked here as: science, didactics, organization, and relations with the milieu), in very few cases (3% of topics) concepts deriving from several areas, for example: *opportunities, limitations and losses of general methodological and legislative cleaning up of Polish science and higher education in Poland against the background of the pan-European campaign for the rationalization of the knowledge sector*, were combined in one topic.

Also, for this reason, the reconstruction of the schemata detailing discourse, which, in accordance with the concept of knowledge formation adopted here, determine the translocations, combining, and classifying of statements, has become particularly important in our studies. Research in this field shows the dominant procedures for the problematization of the university, science, and higher education, at the same time indicating the broader domains of discourse

to which the studied statements belong. This aspect of the analysis led us to formulate a few observations.

First of all, at the level of conference programmes, the pedagogization of university problems is particularly strong; among the conference topics, pedagogical concepts were used to describe domains not related to education (for example politics, media, or economy). In all thematic areas (not only the „didactic” ones), there are such pedagogical terms as: *knowledge, skills, competences, qualifications, education, development, learning, upbringing, school, learning outcomes, quality of education, creativity, teaching methods, assessment, evaluation, tutoring, knowledge transfer*. One of the factors explaining the dominance of pedagogical terms in the discourse on the problems of higher education may be the relatively intense activity of pedagogical faculties and institutes as conference organizers (cf. Table 1).

Secondly, conference programmes are subject to metaphorization and neologization, as evidenced by numerous formulations such as: *cacophony in the black hole, gross education, student as a subject of education or an object of upbringing, rat race, grant culture, recipe for academia, ‘deadlocked’ education, enslaved university, post-university, university 2.0, university in prison, ivory tower, test mania*.

Thirdly, in the presented study, especially for the area of relations between a university and the environment, problematizations become part of the economization of the discourse on science and higher education, using the semantics of economics and social policy, and in particular such terms as: *labour market, employability, business, labour market policy, financial ties, contracting, human capital, entrepreneurship, public debate, target, macro-politics, competitiveness*.

And finally, we can talk about the manifestations of discourse ethicalization, mainly in the thematic area related to science. Interestingly, it is in the statements about science, i.e. in the only domain ascribed somehow to scientists, that the semantics of ethos, morality, and values appears most often, and in particular such terms as: *academic autonomy, freedom, scientific ethics, truth, university idea, master-apprentice relationship, reliability, honesty, deception, values, standards, community, responsibility*.

The last of the distinguished schemata differentiating the object of conference discourse perfectly captures the relations of power and subject inscribed in the governmentality of the university. The last part of the article focuses on the discussion of the obtained results on the ethos dimension of governmentality, i.e. on the consequences of the reconstructed knowledge formations for the practice of constructing the subject and academic identity.

Table 1. Institutional organizers of conferences, including faculties

Higher education institution: pedagogical faculty/institute	Higher education institution: faculty/institute of social sciences/ the humanities/and other	Higher education institution as an organizer without indicating the faculty		Other entities (co-organizers)
		University of Technology	Other higher education institutions	
Jagiellonian University, Institute of Pedagogy; Commission of National Education Pedagogical University, Institute of Educational Sciences University of Lower Silesia, Department of Education University of Szczecin, Institute of Pedagogy and Institute of Psychology (twice) University of Szczecin, Institute of Pedagogy Nicolaus Copernicus University, Faculty of Educational Sciences, Co-organizer: Institute for Educational Research University of Lodz, Department of Educational Studies, Faculty of Educational Sciences Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz, Department of Labour Pedagogy and Andragogy University of Warsaw, Faculty of Education	Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Commission of National Educational Pedagogical University College of Management, Faculty of Social Sciences Nicolaus Copernicus University, Institute of Philosophy, Co-organizer: The Committee of Sciences of the Polish Academy of Sciences Lazarski University, US Economy and Transatlantic Relations Institute, Faculty of Law and Administration University of Gdańsk, Faculty of Biology Maria Skłodowska-Curie University (UMCS), Doctoral Students' Forum of Polish Universities, Doctoral Students' Government, Historical Section of the Doctoral Students' Group of the Faculty of the Humanities Art Academy, Department of Art History and Theory at the Faculty of Painting and New Media AA, Co-organizers: Department of Music Education at the Faculty of Music Education of AA and Multimedia Library of AA	University of Technology Silesian University of Technology Opole University of Technology Wroclaw University of Economics Katowice University of Technology Białystok University of Technology together with the University of Białystok and the University of Economics in Białystok	University of Natural Sciences and Humanities in Siedlce School of Social Sciences of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw, Students' Self-Government University of Economics in Bydgoszcz Eugeniusz Kwiatkowski University of Business and Administration in Gdynia President Stanisław Wojciechowski State Higher Vocational School in Kalisz J.A. Komeński State Higher Vocational School in Leszno Higher School of Economics and the Humanities Bielsko-Biala Jagiellonian University, AGH University of Florida, Orlando, USA, Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology, Daejeon, South Korea Nicolaus Copernicus University, Doctoral Students' Office of Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń in cooperation with the Interdisciplinary Scientific Circle of Doctoral Students and Student Self-government Nicolaus Copernicus University, Doctoral Students' Council University of Wrocław Jagiellonian University University of Białystok University of Security in Poznań University of Białystok Wroclaw School of Banking Radbom Academy of Economics	Augustine-Jean Fresnel Foundation Augustine-Jean Fresnel Foundation/Plagiat.pl Wolters Kluwer, publisher of the LEX Higher Education and Research software Amicus Universitäts Nicolaus Copernici Foundation, Co-organizers: Doctoral students' self-government, Student self-government, Faculty of Law and Administration of Nicolaus Copernicus University Kódź Academic Foundation

Source: Authors' research

Discussion and conclusions

A scientific conference as an institutional system of discursive and procedural interactions that reduce the multiplicity and diversity of interpretations of changes in the system of science and higher education, stabilizes the social order of academia. This reduction is manifested on many levels, the most visible of which lead from the separation of the thematic scope of the conference title, through the selection of topics of papers submitted to the conference ‘agenda’, to the selecting activities and finally establishing the ‘agenda’. In this way, the diversity of the references present at the conference, which construct more or less stable representations of social order, is reduced (see Angermuller, 2010). In the light of the concept of university as a *dispositif* mediating the exchange of signs and symbols (Maeße & Hamann, 2016), the results of presented studies show the processes of circulation of knowledge between higher education and science and domains seemingly external to universities (economy, politics and society). The transfer of signs described above shows the processes of pedagogization, economization, metaphorization and ethicalization of conference discourse.

In all subject areas, i.e. both in the conference programmes that concern teaching, as well as science, the organization of a higher education institution, and its relations with the milieu, an important place is occupied by pedagogical concepts. Due to the history of research on higher education and its place in educational sciences, the presence of pedagogical terms in conference programmes is not surprising. Research on higher education, initiated at the beginning of the 20th century and systematically developed in the 1960s, focused on three trends:

- 1) educational, mainly involving education-related phenomena,
- 2) structural, concerning the social structures within academia, students and researchers,
- 3) one focusing on creating scientific knowledge and its relationship with the authorities (Antonowicz, 2015).

Dominik Antonowicz wrote about the dominance of the teaching perspective in the research on higher education in the 1960s (Antonowicz, 2015). The results of our analyses have shown that in the case of the scientific conferences organized in Poland during the analysed period, i.e. in the years 2011–2014, these issues remain prominent. Moreover, there has been an intense activity of pedagogical faculties and institutes in the organization of conferences, as well as the presence of pedagogical vocabulary (e.g. categories of competence(s), qualifica-

tions, evaluation) in the programmes concerning management, organization, and funding. The interdisciplinary nature of research into higher education has also been confirmed by this feature of conference discourse which we have defined as economisation. The problems of higher education institutions were discussed from the perspective of concepts linking higher education to economic issues, i.e. the labour market and problems with employment and funding.

An interesting aspect of the studied discourse is metaphors. A metaphor is not only a stylistic device or figure of speech, but it performs a creative function in forming scientific knowledge. It can be construed as establishing a shift and extending the meaning of a word (Ricoeur, 1994). Metaphorisation as a rhetorical term transfers and integrates meanings from various domains of discourse, and together with them the knowledge and power they carry. In our research, source domains such as enslavement, imprisonment, or race introduce the varied possibilities of description and interpretation of the target domain, i.e. higher education.

Interestingly, ethics and morality as subjects of conference discourse appear mainly in the context of problems related to science, academic autonomy, research, and the ethos of an academic. And although science remains the least popular topic of conferences, it is here that ethical issues are tackled, and not in the field of discussions about the organization of a higher education institution or its cooperation with the social milieu. Such „absent discourses” in the Polish context are at the same time puzzling and disturbing in a situation where a lot of contemporary research into the policy towards higher education reveals management by means of values (Tallacchini, 2009; Chomik, Ostrowicka, 2019).

In addition to the thematic regularities mentioned above, the results of research into the intensity of scientific debates deserve special attention.

When we realize that during the four years of the transformation of higher education, researchers organized in Poland only 53 scientific conferences devoted to the changes they had experienced, the question about the instances delimiting conference discourse becomes even more urgent. A question that arises here is whether today it is not scientific discourse that defines certain phenomena as problems of science ‘to think about’, and not it, but another instance aspires to an outspoken role in matters concerning the university? These doubts become even more bothering in view of the repeatability of topics submitted by the same speakers to various conferences, which is noticeable in the material we have collected.

Studies on the debate on changes in higher education show that this topic has been explored for many years in the media discourse (Szkudlarek & Stan-

kiewicz, 2014; Snowden & Lewis, 2015). The period of preparations for Minister B. Kudrycka's reform, and then the process of its implementation, were vividly interpreted and discussed in the public debate in Poland. The leading magazines and newspapers published hundreds of articles on higher education and science. Although scientists' statements are present in these places (mainly in the press), nevertheless, they constitute a small part of the voices, usually inconclusive as to "the truth" about the directions of development of the science and higher education sector. As presented studies have shown, a scientific conference is a space used for these purposes only to a small extent. Its importance seems to be weakened in favour of the progressing mediatization of knowledge about higher education and science. This is obviously connected with the possibilities of maintaining such a concept of university which as a circulatory dispositif will be an important field of regulation of social life, and will remain constitutive for the formation of contemporary academic identities.

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