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# Academic Culture from the Perspective of Polish Universities

**Abstract:** The objective of the article is the search for dimensions allowing the study of academic cultures. Academic culture is treated as a special kind of organizational and professional culture shaping the identity of universities, as well as professional identity of academic staff. The research method is the analysis of literature of the subject and few studies available in Poland. Firstly, an attempt was made to define academic culture. Then, a typology of organizational culture was carried out, trying at the same time to identify features characteristic for the academic culture. The last part is devoted to an attempt to identify the distinctive features for the type of academic culture dominating in Polish universities. The article is the result of the NCN (The National Science Centre) project no. 2014/13/B/HS4/015812014/13/B/HS4/01581: Culture of quality in Polish universities, Jagiellonian University, carried out in 2015-2016.

**Key words:** academic culture, organizational culture, university

## Introduction

The objective of the article is the analysis of characteristic features of academic culture which is treated as a special kind of organizational and professional culture related to the functioning of universities. First, an attempt was made to define academic culture. Then a typology of organizational culture was carried out trying at the same time to identify features characteristic for the academic culture. The last part is devoted to the attempt to identify the distinctive features for the type of academic culture dominating in

Polish universities. The article is the result of the NCN (The National Science Centre) project no. 2014/13/B/HS4/01581/2014/13/B/HS4/01581: *Culture of quality in Polish universities*, Jagiellonian University, carried out in 2015-2016. An in-depth analysis of the transformation of contemporary university is included in the monograph *Academic Culture. End of Utopia?* [Sułkowski 2016].

## Meaning of academic culture

Academic culture can be defined as the organizational culture characteristic of universities, which combines the systems of values and patterns of a university with the professor's ethos. Core values integrate the ethos of science with the axiology of higher education. Academic culture thus combines cultural values, standards and norms in organizations characterized by long duration of the horizon. The academic culture is then strongly rooted in universities, which means that it creates a strong organizational identity and is a source of identification for the employees.

Significant changes in higher education systems, educational policy and governance of universities also lead to far-reaching changes in organizational cultures of contemporary universities. In modern literature of the subject the deficit of cultural research of universities and other institutions of higher education can be observed. Initially, in the years 1960-1990 cultural studies of organizations focused on students' cultures and then on organizational cultures of universities [Nkomo 1984; Whorton, Gibson, Dunn 1986, pp. 38–47; Krimsky 1987, pp. 20–29; Corson 1969, pp. 493–494; Clark, 1973, pp. 2–14; London 1978]. Burton Clark studied the diversity of cultures of higher education institutions and the role of beliefs and loyalty in universities and organizational stories as a tool for shaping the identity of the institution [Clark 1998]. In the last two decades there developed international and comparative studies of academic cultures [Szelényi, Rhoads 2013, pp. 425–438], the study of leadership in universities [Stensaker, Vabø 2013, pp. 256–274; Jones 2012, pp. 67–78; Hechanova, Cementina-Olpoc 2013, pp. 11–19] and changes in the education system interpreted through the prism of culture and identity [Stensaker, Välimaa, Sarrico 2012].

David Dill in his pioneer research in the early 80s of the 20th century found that universities are ideological organizations that are immersed in strong organizational cultures. Academic culture is, in principle, impossible to manage but *implicite* it affects the identity, communication and organizational ties. It shows its importance especially in situations of crisis and deficit of organization's resources. Commitment to a strong culture of the university can then protect the organization against destructive conflicts and tensions, strengthening its integration and enabling it to survive [Dill 1982, p. 304]. In the conditions of growing scepticism about the effectiveness of traditional planning tools of

management related with: strategic management, finance, controlling and marketing, there increased interest in governance by values. That focus on values and cultural variability is reflected in organizations operating in global and intercultural environments. As noted by Dill, it is the academic institutions in Western countries that are most culturally similar to Japanese organizations. Their predominant feature is the employment of staff throughout their whole working lives, combined with the fundamental mechanisms for collaborative decision-making combined with an individual sense of professional responsibility (honour). Another characteristic feature, at least for public universities, is the predominance of stable bureaucratic cultures in which organizational structures are permanent and inflexible, and the system of assessment and motivation of staff is not too formalized [Dill 1892]. It can be added to this diagnosis of the 80s that the system is changing in many universities, conforming to the corporate model, with formalized procedures for measuring the quality and motivation of employees. The use of the methods of controlling, strategic planning and managerial accounting in universities is also more frequent. Therefore organizational cultures in universities evolve and differentiate.

Burton Clark believed that academic cultures are characterized by a far-reaching complexity compared to business organizations because they combine at least three areas: organizational identity as such, professional culture of academics and the culture of a particular scientific discipline [Clark 1983]. While describing the strength of academic culture it is worth to pay attention to tradition, continuity and ethos of Western universities. "Rites of passage" associated with student and academic life refer to the multi centenary tradition of universities belonging de facto to a very small group of organizations that have managed to maintain continuity for so long [Dias, Sá 2014, pp. 447–464]. Universities build and strengthen a strong organizational culture by referring to the rich academic history and through social legitimacy of practice as research and didactic activity. The second area of organizational identity is belonging to the academic community, which has a strong, distinctive ethos rooted in the values of science and university teaching. Conferred academic degrees, academic ceremonies, the system of peer assessments and many other practices build self-esteem and professioncentrism of the "professor's" job. Finally, the majority of scientific disciplines creates its own scientific community which has measures of prestige and recognition as well as develops standards for membership and exclusion from the area of research and teaching [Becher 1981]. At the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries we probably had the opportunity to witness the decline of traditional university cultures which, despite the academic ethos, do not withstand the changes caused by the massification of education and the development of the practice of new public management [Field 2015, pp. 172–189].

## Types of academic cultures

Academic cultures change and the pace of these changes has accelerated in the past decades. Traditionally conservative university cultures differentiate according to multiple dimensions. It can be even recognized that the diversification of academic cultures and university missions is a specific megatrend. The dimensions of diversity are associated with many aspects of their activity such as the founding structure of the university, its specialization, the size and prestige of the institution and many other variables. However, while focusing only on internal organizational cultures of universities, it is worthwhile to analyze the dimensions of values which may be the most important axes of the analysis of the identity of the university.

The results of empirical studies show that the cultures of public organizations, although very differentiated, are characterized by certain specific features. The following description of the specific nature of organizational culture universities, based on three elementary dimensions, can be offered:

- pragmatic culture – bureaucratic culture,
- conservative culture – innovative culture,
- hierarchical culture – egalitarian culture,
- weak culture – strong culture.

Selection of these dimensions is associated with an attempt to isolate the dominant, specific characteristic features of public organizations. We can find a significant number of other cultural typologies in the literature of the subject regarding the dimensions of organizational cultures, they, however, do not always differentiate public organizations [Hofstede 1998, pp. 477–493; Schein 1990]. It seems, however, that the proposed dichotomous dimensions of values allow to make an attempt to describe organizational cultures of universities, which have the characteristics of public organizations.

## Bureaucratic and pragmatic culture

There have been conducted many research studies on the problems of bureaucratization of organizational cultures, which allowed the separation of the typology [Grey, Garsten 2001, p. 229–50; Jermier, Slocum, Fry, Gaines 1991, pp. 170–194; Handman 1933, pp. 301–313]. The dichotomy bureaucratic culture *versus* pragmatic culture is firmly rooted in the value systems of different societies, which permeate the level of organizational culture [Hisrich, Bucar, Oztark 2003, pp. 3–28]. Most researchers, analyzing public organizations, use categories characteristic of bureaucratic cultures [Whorton, Worthley 1981, pp. 357–361]. Bureaucratic culture is determined by a set of formalized rules, do's and don'ts, regulating in detail the life of the organization. It is the culture of the written

word, with limited and routinised interpersonal relations, with the dominance of formalized, structured communication channels. Some authors also point to limitations and even pathologies of bureaucratic cultures, such as e.g. resistance to change, inflexibility and waste [Haque 2007]. Pragmatic culture is, on the other hand, characterized by a lack of specific organizational regulations and low formalization. There is a clear focus on verbal contacts of interpersonal nature. In case of most public organizations there dominates a high degree of formalization, with the characteristics of the bureaucracy, that is impersonal prerogatives of power, functional regulation and formalized hierarchical communication. This does not mean obviously that public organizations are “sentenced” to bureaucratic culture [Sporn 1996, p. 41–61; Bartell 2003, pp. 43–70]. Today, an approach designed to transform the bureaucratic culture in the direction of the pragmatic one develops quite quickly [Claver 1999, pp. 455–464; Siegel 2004, pp. 115–142].

## Conservative and innovative culture

The bureaucratic differentiator characteristic of public organizations cultures is closely linked to the domination of conservative culture. One of the fundamental demands of the trend of new public management was to strengthen the innovation and organizational flexibility, which would limit conservatism and bureaucracy of the public sector [Mascarenhas 1993, pp. 319–328]. The impact of organizational culture on innovation is one of the important research topics. Many authors believe that culture, which is reflected in the mentality, shapes the level of innovation, entrepreneurship, flexibility and creativity. Therefore we can talk about innovative, pro-entrepreneurial, flexible and creative cultures and their opposites.

Entrepreneurial organizational culture, which can be largely identified with pragmatic cultures, have been studied by Stephen McGuire, who opted for including creativity and willingness to take on challenges to the cultural model. Distinguishing features of entrepreneurial cultures, according to these studies, are: empowerment and focus on people and creating value through innovation and change [McGuire 2003].

Innovative culture is by definition focused on change and connects with a willingness to take action under shortage of information. Organizations having a higher tolerance of uncertainty often adapt easier to changes in the environment, they are more active and flexible. The fundamental value is change and the *status quo* is identified with stagnation.

Conservative culture leads to reduce uncertainty and risk, which means striving to maintain the *status quo*. The values are continuity and tradition interpreted as the stability and certainty. Planning often assumes deterministic variants that are based on assumptions of risk reduction and the tendency to reduce uncertainty. Threats from the

development of conservative culture are: stagnation, unwillingness to change, avoiding the uncertainties and risks leading to loss of development opportunities, rejection to follow changes of the environment. Conservative orientation can promote the stability of public organizations in some situations but in conditions of high volatility of the environment is dangerous. Conservative organizations tend to isolate themselves from information and resist change.

One cannot ignore, however, the risks arising from the adaptation of pragmatic and innovative culture stemming from business to the needs of higher education institutions. Treatment universities primarily as a business venture may limit the applicability of social mission and social responsibility of the university. Education being a commodity market, treating the student as a customer and limiting the autonomy of academics are the consequences of transition to a market model which combined with the development of pragmatic and innovative cultures. The consequence is also changing the role of universities from the culture-creating research and education institution to a market economy organization.

In studies relating to the public sector, the term “conservative culture” has two dominating meanings. In the first one, it is simply the opposition the culture of innovation, in the other one it is related to the political aspect of the ideas of conservative parties [Belfiore 2004, pp. 183–202]. The latter understanding is dominant in the literature [Willets 1992, pp. 413–421]. It is also one of the key reasons for very diverse interpretations of the values of cultural conservatism in the public sector, which is glorified by some authors, while criticized by others. Nevertheless, in the literature on the public sector significant research of innovation in public organizations, in which there are cultural issues, can also be found [Brown 2003, pp. 230–241]. For example, in the analysis of case studies of innovation in public management conducted by Geoff Mulgan and David Albury there appear problems of mentality, organization’s openness, but also the political will of decision makers. The comparative analysis of such case studies of innovation as: the Open University, The National Literacy Strategy or the West Midlands Ambulance Service NHS crucial, however, are not cultural factors but rather these aspects of the organization of the process of implementation of innovation, which are described by an algorithm [Mulgan, Albury 2003]. As in other sectors, in the case of public management positive assessment of the innovation culture dominates in the literature [Bason 2010, pp. 107–121].

## **Hierarchical and egalitarian culture**

The division according to the criterion of hierarchy combines cultural problems with the structural ones and the issue of organizational power. This classification is sometimes used in the analysis of bureaucratic or power-oriented organizational cultures, e.g. in the

public sector [Parker, Bradley 2000, pp. 125–141]. Another area of research involves trying to build a system relationship between hierarchical culture and strategy and organizational structure [Bates, Amundson, Schroeder, Morris 1995, pp. 1565–1580] as well as organizational learning [Ruppel, Harrington 2001, pp. 37–52]. Hierarchical character of culture in public organizations is a feature closely connected with bureaucracy and conservatism. Although it is related to the power structure, which takes the character of the model of stakeholders, but for most public organizations it is dominated by representatives of the founding bodies (mostly state agencies or local governments). Preferring hierarchy often involves a conviction that people are different and the organization reflects this diversity. The organization, therefore, should have many levels of control and the significant variation in the rights, privileges and benefits of different groups of workers. This is facilitated by the tendency to bureaucratization of public organizations and the weakness of competitive mechanisms in the public sector [Claver 1999, pp. 455–464]. In hierarchical organizations the core values are discipline and order which are created by the power structure.

The opposite of hierarchical cultures are egalitarian cultures, where equality dominates. Organisations should have a flat structure and limit the number of levels of management as much as possible. Significant differences in the powers, privileges and benefits among employees are inadvisable. Egalitarian cultural orientation leads to accentuate the similarities between employees, focus on spontaneity and flexibility of structures and power relations [Sułkowski 2012].

Hierarchical public organizations differ from businesses because the average salary range in the case of public bodies is small. Attempts to introduce the wage incentive systems in the public sector do not significantly alter the situation [O'Donnell 1998, pp. 28–40; Weibel, Rost, Osterloh 2010, pp. 387–412; Houston 2000, pp. 713–728]. Still the average span of wages in enterprises, depending on the organizational level is much higher. Other features of hierarchical organizations are generally similar regardless of whether they belong to the public sector or commercial one.

## **Weak and strong culture**

The dichotomy between a weak and strong organizational culture is the most commonly studied typology of organizational cultures. A strong corporate culture is characterized by homogeneity, and therefore uniformity and universal consensus among employees about the key assumptions, values and norms. Strong identification with organizational values would lead to a greater involvement of employees and, consequently, higher efficiency [Peters, Waterman 2000]. The internal cultural inconsistency, manifested by the development of subcultures and even counter-cultures, could lead to the disinte-

gration of the organization. In the literature there is no consensus on which type of organizational culture is better from the point of view of the organization. Many authors are on favour of predominant position of strong organizational culture, but there are also many opinions saying the contrary. Vijay Sathe, recognizing the supremacy of the strong organizational culture, proposes to assess it organizationally through the prism of its clarity, dissemination and rooting [Sathe 1983]. Strong culture, i.e. homogeneous, distinctive, widespread and rooted in the organization, can also limit innovation and rational decision-making, and also hinder the process of implementing changes. Focusing on common values suppresses nonconformist views and tends to schematic thinking shared by the majority. Czesław Sikorski writes of a strong organizational culture similarly sceptically [2008, p. 65].

Public organizations are statistically more likely to be among the weak and network organizational cultures because different groups and subcultures are often driven by conflicting interests and profess different values [Agranoff 2007]. It is also a characteristic flowing from the domination of stakeholder model, assuming the negotiation of interests between groups of influence in organizations [Riege, Lindsay 2006, pp. 24–39].

## Polish academic culture

Analyzing the specific features of Polish academic culture, one can refer to the characteristics of Polish culture in general. I refer to the diagnosis of „social vacuum”, as proposed in the 70s of the twentieth century by Stefan Nowak and „post-grange culture” created by Jerzy Hryniewicz and used as the basis in the research studies of university cultures by Cezary Kościelniak [Nowak 1979; Kościelniak 2015; Hryniewicz 2004].

Nowak believed that Poland being under partitions, later controlled by the Soviet Union was a country completely devoid of civic institutions and culture created a collective defence mechanism in the form of a lack of confidence in the oppressive state and its agencies and to rely solely on the communities of family, neighbourhood and church. Universities were also in this „social vacuum” and thus became a place creating a network of friendly interests that stand in the opposition to power. The selection of employees to organizational units and promotions are held on the surface by competitions, but it is de facto a recruitment of pre-selected people, where „inbreeding” is preferred (graduates and university staff). Participatory mechanisms at the university, therefore, depend mainly on protecting the interests of one’s own units and striving to maintain the status quo. This is one of the reasons of conservative culture of Polish universities, which change under the pressure of political decisions and the environment, but have criticized these changes, and they often are contesting and boycotting them. Neo-liberal changes in Polish universities, as in many other countries, mean the rationaliza-

tion of sources of income and economization of activities, formalization and bureaucratization of business, development of administrative structures as well as the realization of the mission of the entrepreneurial university. In the last 8 years, policymakers exert pressure on Poland to be „top student” of the Bologna process, which resulted in new regulations forcing universities to change. Universities, forced to introduce the National Qualifications Framework, the formalization of the process of quality assurance and the development of reporting (implementation of the POLON information system), adapted, which however did not lead to deeper transformation of their activities. The change in general has not been internalized; the National Qualifications Framework, learning outcomes, quality management systems of education are treated not as a tool for controlling but onerous bureaucratic steps, a kind of „scholasticism” imposed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education and the Polish Accreditation Committee. Research studies by Marek Kwiek and Tadeusz Wawak demonstrate that opinions about changes in the condition of the university among academic staff are rather critical [Kwiek 2015 Wawak 2012, pp. 370–393]. The last decade was also a period of significant European investment in the higher education sector in Poland, which saved a lot of universities from a deep crisis. Most universities benefited from significant European and national funds thanks to which they significantly improved their educational infrastructure without burdening their budgets heavily. However, in the years to come the European funds will be reduced, and the cost of maintaining the infrastructure will remain, which may result in financial problems for many universities. Consequently, within the universities there will be a stronger pressure for carrying out neo-liberal changes. Cezary Kościelniak describes Polish academic culture, as it was already mentioned – referring to the concept of „post-grange culture”, proposed by Jerzy Hryniewicz [Kościelniak 2015]. Polish model of capitalism, according Hryniewicz reflects the “grange” relationships, characteristic of the centuries-old tradition of our country which was agrarian until the mid-twentieth century,. These characteristic features of grange culture:

- placing relations of kin and neighbourhood over civil and organizational bonds,
- obedient and faithful execution of the work, attitude to executive orders with a small degree of self-initiative,
- homogeneity of the working environment associated with a low degree of mobility,
- autocratic management style,
- the need to import cultural models of behaviour,
- referring this model of religious culture: it is characteristic of Catholic cultures [Hryniewicz 2004].

Kościelniak describes as features characteristic of the „post-grange culture” are reflected in the culture of Polish universities. A significant feature is conservatism, the desire to maintain the *status quo* and lack of risk appetite called the syndrome of “familia-

city". The conservatism relates to "inbreeding" and therefore aversion to hiring people from outside the university and inviting them to teams. Legislative changes from 2012 were to force mobility and eliminate nepotism, which until now, however, in my opinion, has not happened. The model of obtaining degrees and working in one university, with very limited mobility, still dominates. Nepotism takes the form of "exchange of services" and hiring relatives in "befriended" units. Relations between the heads of scientific and teaching sections and their subordinates have the quality of paternalism, which can suppress critical thinking and freedom of scientific creativity. A distinctive feature of Polish academic culture is hierarchic and autocratic character. Petrified structure of promotion and scientific degrees perpetuates the hierarchy based on the permanently obtained status, rather than on the regular assessments of the scientific work and teaching. Autocracy is the dominant method of management by the heads of units while the subordinates are characterized by passivity and "learned helplessness". This is accompanied by formalism in relations with students and "others" and the intimacy in the relationship with "their kind". One can add to this the ceremonialism, which manifests itself in the ritualisation of many activities and demonstrative, even ostentatious, cultivating symbols of power and position. Polish universities are the antithesis of entrepreneurship and often teach students passive attitudes ("being employed"). Kościelniak recognizes that the Polish model of academic culture has its advantages related to the stronger identification of employees with the university, creating personal authority of professors and patterns of university staff interaction [Kościelniak 2015, p. 24].

## Summary

The results of studies indicate that the organizational cultures of universities, although very diverse, are in majority characterized by certain specific features [Sułkowski 2016], whose important aspect is the formalization and bureaucratisation of culture as well as the approach to change [Grey, Garsten 2001, pp. 229–250; Jermier, Slocum, Fry, Gaines 1991, pp. 170–194; Handman 1933, pp. 301–313]. One of the frequently used dimensions is to contrast the bureaucratic and pragmatic culture. The bureaucratic versus pragmatic culture dichotomy is firmly rooted in the value systems of different societies, which permeate the level of organizational culture [Hisrich, Bucar, Oztark 2003, pp. 3–28]. The domination of conservative culture is closely linked to bureaucratic differentiator of cultures of public universities. One of the fundamental demands of the new public management trend was to strengthen the innovation and organizational flexibility, which would limit conservatism and bureaucracy of the public sector [Mascarenhas 1993, pp. 319–328]. The impact of organizational culture on innovation is one of important research topics [Martins, Terblanche 2003, pp. 64–74; Chandler, Keller, Lyon 2000].

Polish academic culture is characterized by features resulting from the combination of the European cultural model of the traditional Humboldt type university with the local phenomenon of patterns of social relations called „grange culture.” The positive side of this cultural formation is to strengthen the organizational identity of the universities and the identification of employees with them. Weaknesses can be found in the culture of Polish universities, where the „oligarchy of professors”, seniorship, inbreeding, conservatism and contestation of change dominate.

In summary, a few features of the academic culture dominant in Poland can be indicated:

- 1) hierarchical character of academic structures,
- 2) formalized relationships within the academic hierarchy,
- 3) growing bureaucratization of university activities,
- 4) ceremonialism and ritualism within the culture of universities,
- 5) oligarchical character of relations among university staff,
- 6) seniorial structures of power and authority in science and universities,
- 7) focus on internal promotion of employees.

Most of these features of Polish academic culture indicates rooting in conservative values and cultural norms of the traditional university, which are subjected to strong external pressure of changes generated by the policy makers introducing new public management mechanisms in higher education [more: Sułkowski 2016].

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