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Liberal education in CEE countries: a case study of MISH UW in the transitional period

Abstract: After 1989 CEE countries have faced the challenge of transforming their higher education systems. Apart from a growing need for professional, market-oriented study programs, in 1992 the University of Warsaw has created the College of Inter-Faculty Individual Studies in the Humanities (MISH UW). This institution has allowed a gradually growing number of students to follow an individual path of study under supervision of a tutor. It was not a college in the full sense, rather a mode of study, allowing students to attend classes at humanities and social sciences departments of the University. The hope was that the college would serve as a model for transforming the whole university. It may be tempting to call this kind of study ‘liberal education’ – so in the first part I will attempt to show to what extent this can be justified.

MISH became very popular in Poland as a model of *ahonors programme* of a kind. Over the years 10 big public Polish universities have introduced their own MISH. Artes Liberales Academy has been created to serve as a MISH between six major public universities, and Collegium Artes Liberales started offering BA and MA studies in *artes liberales*. But at the same time the eastern partnerships – with universities in Ukraine and Russia – has been developed and resulted in opening MISH-like institutions in those countries. I would like to show the map of liberal education institutions in CEE countries.

All those institutions are connected to Jerzy Axer, a classicist, currently dean of recently created Faculty of “Artes Liberales”, but it should be noted that MISMAP (the analogical college for natural sciences and mathematics) was founded first and keeps developing. During the last two decades a number of things have changed, and internal as well as external factors have played a role. Changes may be impeding, and the discussion on more distinct visions of study spreading. In the last part of my presentation, I would like to present current discussions on reforming MISH.

Part I: MISH as a part of the University of Warsaw

The origins of MISH

During the communist period, there were virtually no private universities. But after 1989, the higher education system in Poland has been gradually opening to first generation students and started covering more vocational (especially business-connected) fields. A number of new institutions has been opened to meet the demographic and market demands. But public universities were by no means passive: the early nineties have brought to life modes of study that were evening/weekend based. Many students that could not get into traditional path (lacking time or qualifications) were now being admitted. Giving them the opportunity to receive credentials needed in market-based and young knowledge economy was at the same time a way to finally raise the faculty salaries. Traditional studying mode was free of charge, but new ones (in private and public institutions) charged students for their services.

But market orientation was not the only one present in Poland's public higher education. In the early nineties prof. Andrzej Kajetan Wróblewski, rector at the University of Warsaw, was hoping to transform the Humboldtian-Soviet type of big institutions with fenced departments into a set of schools. Having failed to do it, he opted for creating colleges where students of different tracks may attend classes together. With this intention in mind, two institutions were created: College of Inter-Faculty Individual Studies in Mathematics and Natural Sciences and College of Inter-Faculty Individual Studies in the Humanities (MISH UW).

Traditional students are not allowed to attend classes outside their study program – MISH and MISMAP students are generally free to choose among all classes offered in humanities/social sciences or mathematical/natural sciences respectively. There are statements that it was thought that after few years they will close down, because the whole university will become MISH/MISMAP (Detweiler & Axer, 2012, p. 244). That didn't happen: MISH students comprise now 1% of University of Warsaw students, 20 years later¹.

We must now be forgiving to this eager optimism, but it is also worth noting that for over ten years after 1989 the government has guaranteed strong university autonomy and did not intervene into its internal matters. Having once agreed to the creation of MISH – which surely was not an easy issue – the Ministry of Higher Education left its regulations to the University.

¹ Figures for MISMAP are similar.

Core characteristics of MISH

As a former student of MISH with little knowledge about MISMAP, I will focus on my institution. First of all, for many years it was relatively small – serving dozens rather than hundreds of students. They are scattered among 5 or 6 years of study, depending on whether a student pursues two diplomas. It would be fair to say that MISH was perceived an elite institution, so it was obvious that there should never be too many students.

Secondly, MISH allowed students to choose their own path of study and combine courses into study program. This revolutionary idea – which points back to C.W. Eliot reform at Harvard 120 years earlier – was the core of MISH study and the main point of its public message. With time, departments started more visibly limiting the number of MISH students that were allowed to take classes – so that “their” students would not lose the place. In some of most popular departments (like philology or law) there is now a strict limit, and MISH students have to apply for a recommendation².

When the Ministry of Higher Education published a list of obligatory courses for particular study fields, generally they became obligatory for MISH students as well. At University of Warsaw³, MISH was able to reach agreement with affiliated departments as to required courses – and the idea was that MISH students, many majoring in two disciplines, should not be obliged to as much courses as regular students.

Students were to choose their courses under the supervision of a tutor⁴. A tutor at MISH is faculty member (at least with Ph. D.) who were supposed to contact with a student regularly, help them finding good courses and accept the study plan. A tutor as a rule has to be affiliated with the department or institute within which a student wants to complete study path and receive a diploma. It was also – or maybe in a first place – designed as an intellectual relation. The tutorial was introduced to guarantee that the elected courses would lead to results comparable with normal mode of study.

Choosing the study plan and institution of tutorial were to guarantee individual character of MISH. In times when almost all courses were prescribed – without distribution requirements

²In most cases, however, MISH students are allowed to study what they want to pursue. But when not given a recommendation on a restrictive department, MISH student have troubles with completing their studies in time.

³As well as in few other universities.

⁴This should not be confused with a tutor – private teacher in wealthy families or tutoring/tutorial – a pedagogical institution in some Anglo-Saxon universities, in which students meet on individual (or almost individual) and weekly basis with a professor to report knowledge gained and discuss written work about it.

– there was a substantial difference between MISH and regular students in terms of relative freedom and agency.

Growth of interdisciplinary studies

Motivation behind such design of MISH was both idealistic and realistic. It was assumed, that the main problem with higher education to date was departmentalization: students were choosing a field of study and then wilfully closing themselves in prison for the next five years. Research and science – that how the story goes – does not go that way. There is also a rationale that students should not restrict their study to one discipline. Jerzy Axer, who proposed to rector creation of MISH year after MISMAP, was a trained classical philologist and his Centre for Studies on the Classical Tradition in Poland and East-Central Europe (OBTA UW), founded in 1991, was involving faculty discussion and cooperation⁵. MISH was following OBTA on the way to interdisciplinarity in humanities – this time for students. It has also gradually added social sciences⁶. As in research different methodologies are merged or even triangulated to reach more insightful results, also students were supposed to benefit from visiting different departments⁷.

MISH did not change University of Warsaw to its liking, but nevertheless it may definitely be called success. Over time the model has spread to other public universities in Poland, resulting now in 10 MISH institutions (or modes of study), that are generally similar to original MISH UW, but smaller and less visible within their *alma mater*. Four biggest MISH institutions⁸ serve 1000 students each year, other six – who don't publish statistics – may have additional 500.

Moreover, MISH was such a success in its time that it paved the way to some other institutions, that should in this place be at least pointed out. 'Artes Liberales' Academy (AAL) was created in 1999 to give students an opportunity to study at two public universities

⁵ It is claimed that MISH was a result of over decade of discussions on alternative University after the imposition of Martial Law in 1981 (Detweiler & Axer, 2012, p. 242).

⁶ But it should be remembered that first of all, interdisciplinarity is a much older concept. Moreover, MISH doesn't open students to natural sciences, and has practically no connection to MISMAP (which is somehow amazing).

⁷ It is worth noting that many MISH alumni are choosing to stay at university at least for Ph.D. It may be said that MISH is mainly an academic mode of study. MISH students as a general rule do not have to

⁸ MISH at University of Warsaw, Jagiellonian University, Silesian University and Lodz University.

at the same time. It may be said that AAL is the MISH study between universities – however, very few students are admitted to AAL.

Even earlier, in 1996, East European School in the Humanities (MSH) was created to serve as a platform to connect academics in humanities in Poland and Ukraine, especially in fields neglected during the USSR period. Regular sessions are held to discuss problems, mainly historical. MSH is also a research platform, open for faculty from Poland, Ukraine, Russian Federation and Belarus. Since 2010 it is joined by project Academia in Public Discourse, comprised of seminars and longer debates in different countries, that provide interested faculty with the opportunity to discussion, important as it is for tense Polish-Russian relations. The Eastern dimension of MISH activities is worth mentioning also as a source of spreading the MISH model East – as for now, MISH-like institutions function in Lvov, Minsk, Hrodna and Rostov-on-Don.

Founding of Kolegium Artes Liberales

The Bologna process did not necessarily harm MISH as such, but in a way enlarged the freedom of students. They were now required to prepare additional thesis after three years of studying in each field. But on the other hand, they were allowed to change tracks during study in MISH, so that for example one can receive B.A. in sociology and M.A. in international relations, impossible thing to do in the previous system.

It cannot be forget that during first 15 years, MISH – with small exceptions – did not offer their students diploma of its own, as well as did not function as a full didactic unit⁹. It was more like a honors program at public universities in the U.S. It was only in 2008 that newly founded Kolegium Artes Liberales (KAL) has started admitting students, offering its own field of study within the structures of University of Warsaw.

KAL was designed with University of Chicago's core curriculum in mind. Students of first cycle studies could choose between a humanities and social sciences major, which In fact may be very similar, as there are only small differences in distribution requirements. Moreover, Mark O'Connor, director of Arts & Sciences Honors Program at Boston College, have been

⁹With the exception of "Moduł MISH", relatively limited number of courses offered to MISH students only by MISH itself. OBTA (later transformed into IBI) was also very closely related to MISH in personal and organizational terms, which has some didactical implications.

involved in first period of institutional design. For the first time the link between MISH milieu and American educational ideas has become so visible¹⁰.

Now as KAL offer both first and second cycle studies, it may be said that MISH mosaic is completed. In some ways it may be worth to spend time on evaluation. Especially MISH UW should be scrutinized, as a source institution for didactics and the biggest up to date. KAL students are mainly MISH students, who take single courses to satisfy the curriculum requirements, or decide to attend full program in *artes liberales*¹¹. It would be fair to say, that at least in first few years it was the intention of KAL to keep low profile and serve mainly MISH students. *Artes liberales* is another option for MISH students, and there remains a conviction that KAL is kind of a their own place – with few outsiders admitted. Generally, MISH is the fence of the system (from students' perspective) and for this reason I would like to focus my analysis on it.

Part II: MISH analysis

There are two types of questions worth discussing with regards to MISH. The first strand is the American one: can we call the type of education that MISH offers – liberal education? If so, in which dimensions? Institutional or ideological? Is MISH any different from colleges of liberal arts in Bratislava, Budapest, St. Petersburg or Berlin?

The other type of questions are those internal to MISH. Is it a good choice from students these days? How different it is now, after twenty years? What are the reasons that future students do not flock into enrollment room? What are the main problems that MISH is facing now? Reform of which elements is being discussed and why?

Those two types of questions (and answers) could possibly teach us something about the higher education in CEE countries. For me, both types are interconnected – not only because in our region comparison to America is always flattering, but because the freedom of liberal education is so appalling. So it may be worth discussing what does this liberal education talk teach us about ourselves. But let me first show you some answers to those two types of questions.

¹⁰ An international conference on college idea in Poland and USA took place in 2009, bringing together renowned scholars from different fields. Papers presented are published in (Wilczek & O'Connor, 2011).

¹¹ Now there are both three year B.A. and two year M.A. studies available.

Internal issues

First, I would like to address the internal questions of MISH One must bear in mind, that the number of students that complete the application for the first-cycle program has not grown for years. Currently it is about 250 candidates for 120 places¹². Demography can be an issue – there are fewer young people in Poland now than 10 years ago - but not to such extent. And still, there definitely is a case of inadequate promotion of MISH studies. Taking into account that since 2013 in Poland the only guaranteed way to study two fields without paying fees for one of them is to attend MISH (or other inter-faculty studies), substantial growth should be expected – something that did not happen. Even if it were the case, then at the same time there should be a decline in number of candidates choosing MISH for its unique study mode.

So it seems possible that either MISH is not a good choice anymore¹³ or for some reasons future students decide not to apply. For many years it was claimed that it is hard to get a place without some distinction in field knowledge contest (olimpiada). But still, students may feel that it is a better option to combine studying and a (part-time) job rather than studying two fields of studies. Finally, there may be a general decline of interest in humanities and social sciences as non-employable fields. Tight economies have always something to say about what students choose.

But whatever the reasons, there is a great need for action. The college authorities should take some initiative – but it has always been hard to be active and innovative in public institution. Opening of MISH study modes in private institutions (Collegium Civitas, Pultusk Academy of Humanities) should be an important message for MISH administration, even if they are not appealing to the same sort of candidates. Most of private institutions in Poland are far behind public in terms of academic level.

After last few years of relative stagnation, MISH under new dean prof. Marek Wąsowicz is now at least declaring the will of reform. The core components of MISH – individual mode of study, tutoring, “interdepartmentalness” – has all been put into question by recent governmental reforms or internal stagnation. Limited number of students admitted to some

¹² Until academic year 2007/8 the figure was 70, then raised to 100 and now 120 – which is almost doublefold growth.

¹³ There were voices that a diploma with an adnotation (within MISH) could be less valued in some fields than a traditional one (law may be the case).

departments¹⁴ and relatively longer (than few years ago) list of required courses impedes with the individual dimension. Tutoring in many cases has become fictional (one tutor even had 15 pupils) and became just a name for signing papers two times a year – because many tutors do not know very well what should be their role and what is this MISH all about. Finally, the interdepartmental character is harder to defend when students are assigned to classes via an Internet-based system (which limits the privileges and maximum number of students in class) as well as the recent decision of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education to limit the number of ECTS points that are given to students free of charge¹⁵.

The students' role within MISH cannot be overpraised. Their representatives are responsible for many events, of scientific (??? academic?) character, like the conference on the 20th anniversary of MISH and previous year congress joining MISH students from different universities – for the first time in history. Even in institution where students do not generally take classes together, young people are helping each other and their representatives play an important political role in the College Council. Thanks to that the practicalities of MISH and its possible reforms are discussed with students.

Last year, at least two committees has been discussing the reform of MISH. One of them was the rectoralcomitee, lead by present dean of MISH Marek Wąsowicz, which focused on MISH mode of study in general. The other one was a student initiative, shortened KOMIN, struggling to prepare recommendations based on student experience and problems faced by students themselves.

MISH vs. liberal education

Now let's switch to external questions – regarding what I called relation to liberal education ideal. There are numerous definitions of liberal education, but I will go with a contemporary one – maybe less distinctive, but safer to use at the beginning¹⁶.

Liberal Education is an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. It provides students with broad knowledge of the wider

¹⁴ Numbers remained the same even as MISH itself has grown.

¹⁵ However, giving MISH and MISMAP students additional points. Another pool has been assigned by UW rector.

¹⁶ The classical approaches have been called elitist or obsolete, because they have been focusing on classical antiquity of the Mediterranean. It would be worth noting, that MISH UW – despite the profile of its environment – have not required students even to study Latin (many of them choose it, though). In this terms, MISH UW does not force students to attend particular classes, apart from semiotics, physical education and exam in foreign language. It also has small distribution requirement (one course in the humanities and one in sciences). Some people even claim that “the day the word *liberal* has stopped being used to describe education “befitting a gentleman in social rank,” it should have been scrapped by the academic community” (Ferrall, 2011, p. 8).

world (e.g. science, culture, and society) as well as in-depth study in a specific area of interest. A liberal education helps students develop a sense of social responsibility, as well as strong and transferable intellectual and practical skills such as communication, analytical and problem-solving skills, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2012).

It may be easier to understand the essence of liberal education by saying what it is not. So it is not an vocational mode of study, in which learning outcomes are prescribed, and job preparedness is the main aim of studying. It is not an political (especially liberal) indoctrination, though. The rationale behind liberal education is the belief that a future citizen should learn from different sources and orient in different fields. There are two reasons expressed to back up such claim: one is the interconnectedness of all knowledge, the other one – the fact that future is so unpredictable one should better learn, how to learn new things and how to approach what is outside of hers or his specialization.

Nowadays there are many institutional backgrounds that claim to provide students with a liberal education. The strongest one for many decades – a liberal arts college, small and residential – is not the only game in town anymore. So the definitions of liberal education are also focusing more on learning outcomes, pedagogy and civic ideals (in the broad, communicational sense). For example:

Modern liberal arts education is a system of higher education designed to foster in students the desire and capacity to learn, think critically, and communicate proficiently, and to prepare them to function as engaged citizens. It is distinguished by a flexible curriculum that allows for student choice and demands breadth, as well as depth, of study, and by a student-centered pedagogy that is interactive and requires students to engage directly with critical texts within and outside of the classroom (Becker, 2003, p. 3).

Finally, the growing diversity of the modern world favors the effect, less the method. There are particular values that are present in many definitions from different historical periods – even when some elements, like classical literature or Christian heritage has become invisible (or not present anymore). Trying to combine two strong ideals of liberal education (the philosophical and rhetorical one), Donald W. Harward proposes such an understanding:

Liberal education is not ideological indoctrination. There is, however, an “ideal” of liberal education. At its best, liberal education enables students to develop critical thinking skills and disciplinary competence and to distinguish categories of information, acknowledge ambiguity, and eschew easy certainty. It encourages students to be both reasonable and passionate—to link learning with action—and, in that respect, to champion the cultivation of the civic and the responsibilities of citizenship and leadership. Liberal education does respect contrarian ideas and challenge the status quo. And if expectations are held high and students are truly valued, the consequences of liberal education are deeply relevant to students’ lives (Harward, 2012, p. 15).

These three definitions of liberal education exemplify how difficult it is to find its distinctive features without the risk of being called too exclusive (easy but strong objection). The problem of defining liberal education is interesting, but for the analysis of Central and Eastern Europe it would be more important to point out the main features of the ideal.

I particularly like to think of three elements of a liberal learning. The first one is the curriculum: general knowledge should be integrated with particular focus on the field, breadth plus depth. Some institutions leave the breadth requirement to students, prescribing only the amount of courses, other prescribe whole general study, some (like KAL) are in the middle. When it comes to method, it is a general agreement that liberal education, based on arguing and critical thinking, can only take place in small groups; most institutions require students to work hard, write and read papers and comment on each others work. Finally, the aim of liberal learning is always multifaceted: student should leave college prepared to work or next level of studies, but at the same time she or he should be oriented in contemporary situation, able to take part in modern society and willing to contribute to the common good. A well-rounded student, at least in theory, should be – excuse my word – a gentleman of a multicultural democracy, ready for whatever can happen.

Leaving aside the question to what extent such an education is really taking place in institutions that claim to be liberal arts colleges, it is legitimate to ask what kind of institutions suit liberal education best. The Winter 1999 edition of “Daedalus”, bears the title “Distinctively American? Residential Liberal Arts Colleges” (Koblik&Graubard, 2000). Written after period of attacks on liberal arts colleges, the book include contribution evaluating this type of colleges and pointing out their distinctive features. They are small, private, residential, independent and pricey. MISH, on the other hand, is small, but public, non-residential, dependent and free. The main difference, of course, is that you can graduate from liberal arts college (pretty good choice if you can afford it), but you cannot graduate from MISH – which is “just” an honors program.

What is more, contrary to some colleges of arts and sciences in Europe (esp. the Netherlands, ECLA Berlin, Smolny College, Budapest) – the instruction takes place in Polish, and in fact there is no single field of study that can be pursued fully in English within MISH. This model has spread to Russian Federation – and in the next few years we will see, what will be the consequences.

From the external perspective, the development of initiatives of liberal education in CEE countries is an element of wider process of democratization after 1989.

The idea of liberal arts education has found particular resonance in Central and Eastern Europe (where this author has been engaged in educational reform for the past decade) since the collapse of Communism. Academics see liberal learning as an antidote to Marxist-Leninist ideology, which permeated the teaching process in Soviet times, and as a remedy to the disciplinary rigidity and

didactic pedagogy that dominates higher education in the region. Since much of what has happened in the region over the last decade has been about the enhancement of citizens' agency, many reformers find liberal arts education consonant with their broader political and social goals. In short, liberal arts education is seen as a fundamental part of the process of democratization and as a means of promoting an active and engaged citizenry (Becker, 2003, p. 1).

We are back to at least two dimensions: one is philosophical (scientific?), with regard to both teaching and research. In this respect, some scholars like liberal colleges because they are interdisciplinary, some students attend them because they are given more opportunities for development in terms of study fields. Both groups like the greater freedom connected to liberal education, and both struggle to connect it with responsibility. On the other hand, especially from the perspective of officials and general public, liberal education can be seen an opportunity to empower young citizens, open their minds and better prepare to take part in public discourse, both intellectual and political. But the common ground is handing the initiative and decision power down to students, thereby allowing them to be architects of their fortune.

And in this terms, MISH can be seen as an example of liberal education – at least in declarative sphere. Giving the students the power to choose their own path of study was a new quality in Polish higher education, even though the freedom wasn't (and definitely isn't) as big as it can or should be. The bottom line is to give students the freedom and responsibility.

But still, there are some serious obstacles in terms of quality of education received by MISH students. First of all, MISH is not offering its own study programs, so cannot be held responsible for what students can choose. MISH is a platform, not a school of its own – how good or how bad students do is entirely up to them. This can be seen a drawback, but also a virtue. 16 departments affiliated with MISH provide quite long list of courses to choose from.

Moreover, for this reason MISH students do not necessarily share a common college experience – in the intellectual or social sense. MISH is an individual mode of study, and in a serious sense of the word. Student, with a help of a tutor, finds a compromise between what is required by particular department and what he or she wishes to study. MISH student may become better citizens, more insightful academicians, more interesting or conscious persons etc. – but no one, including MISH – can be held responsible for achieving those aims.

Conclusion

I find this characteristic of MISH somehow connected to its Central and East European history. There are voices that MISH is not a college, an independent institutions – and that it should be followed by a fully new entity of a private origin. Private initiative in education is very tricky outside the U.S., but even more importantly, the relative dependence of MISH may be intentional. Students – as citizens in a free market economy – should be held responsible for their choices all the way down the university, not only at the beginning. MISH is giving them the rod, not the fish.

MISH, of course, has many drawbacks, and the discussion about making some necessary amendments is now well underway. First MISH alumni are now in their forties and it seems that the time of evaluation is finally coming. Referring to liberal education may of course be considered a fig leaf, so that those familiar with western liberal education can assume that MISH (and company) is something similar. But I would rather see the potential of this affiliation, responsibility for providing students with basic qualities of a traditional liberal education.

It would be beneficial for MISH to find some substantial learning outcomes, that it can guarantee regardless of field of study. Moreover, there is still the problem of including more science classes – which are part of liberal arts, but are almost completely ruled out of MISH, which gives the opportunity to study only in social sciences and humanities departments. Finally, liberal education has many a times been connected to the outside world, e.g. by community service.

Finding ways to making public university more accountable for its services, overcoming its departmentalization and encouraging civic involvement are problems inherited by institutions in many CEE countries. Evaluating the results of potential reforms should take into account not only institutional, but also political culture context. But this is the story of Eastern Europe – it should be reinvented. Again and again. I see MISH as an attempt in doing so. One have every reason not to be fully satisfied by the results. But as JacekKuron has famously stated: “Do not burn existing committees – build your own ones”.

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