The Two Decades of Privatization in Polish Higher Education: Cost-Sharing, Equity, and Access


Abstract

Poland, via privatization, found its own way of expanding its higher education system in the last twenty years. The emergence of powerful market mechanisms in public higher education and the emergence of the private sector itself in Poland can be viewed as the two different faces of the same process of the privatization of higher education. In existing literature, Polish higher education in general has been discussed in a highly dichotomous manner: either public institutions, or private institutions, or both as opposite to each other). The radical distinctiveness of the public sector from the private sector has been a constant point of reference in both research and policy analyses. But both sectors can also be looked at as following the same road of privatization if the phenomenon of privatization as applied to higher education is taken more widely. The paper is divided into 8 sections: the general theme of coping with financial austerity in various segments of public services and the wider economic contexts accompanying the privatization of higher education; “the policy of non-policy” as a guiding thread in the expansion of both public and private sectors and its positive impact on equitable access to higher education; the two decades of growth of the private sector; financing higher education in Poland in brief; internal privatization as a response of the underfunded public sector; cost-sharing – the different roles of tuition fees in (nominally free) public and private sectors; academic survival strategies in the public sector in the times of financial distress and their implications on the Polish academic profession; and conclusions.