

What Can be Learnt from United States Academia: the Case Study of the University of Wisconsin-Madison



Dmytro Khutkyi¹

Abstract

Ukrainian academia in its current state needs fundamental modernization. With the ongoing political reforms, there is a realistic chance to introduce the best education and research standards. A case study conducted through the method of participant observation in a United States university² illuminates academic principles and approaches, which are worth implementing in Ukraine. They cover the following domains: transparency, convenience for teachers and students, academic freedom and culture, legitimation of various forms of knowledge, teaching, study, and research patterns, and organization of department functioning. And these points can be introduced by internal decisions at university or departmental level.

Keywords: Academia, higher education, the United States of America, Ukraine.

¹ Candidate of Sciences (Ph.D.) in Sociology, Representative of Development of International Research, Kiev International Institute of Sociology, Ukraine, khutkyi@gmail.com

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Introduction

Contemporary Ukrainian academia still bears a number of obsolete inefficient bureaucratic elements that prevent it from introducing cutting-edge innovations. Just to mention the legacy of institutional segregation of education from research that hinders bringing in the most updated scientific findings to teaching and restricts the recruitment of young scholars to research networks. There are definitely contextual problems like the stagnant Ukrainian economy that prevent massive investment in academic and commercial research. Nevertheless, there are institutional conditions which can be altered. The best example is the progressive higher education bill, which is currently under consideration in the Ukrainian Parliament. In the spirit of positive psychology, it is useful to concentrate not on criticism, but on suggestion, and not on problems beyond our control, but on issues, which can be deliberately changed.

According to U.S. News & World Report rankings in 2013, in the field of Sociology the University of Wisconsin-Madison was ranked #1 together with Princeton University and the University of California-Berkeley³. Therefore, it is an excellent model to learn from. The following analysis is mostly grounded on participant observation of everyday teaching, study and research patterns in the case of University of Wisconsin-Madison, in Wisconsin State, USA. The fieldwork was conducted in the period of September-December 2013 within the framework of my stay in the university as a visiting scholar, a Carnegie Research Fellow. The data is definitely qualitative and the conclusions are case-based, and cannot be generalized on the entire university or US academia. Rather, they can be viewed as examples of best practices, useful for Ukrainian academia.

³ Sociology. Ranked in 2013. (2014).

For a comprehensive overview, a number of institutional components have been observed: transparency, convenience for teachers and students, academic freedom, academic culture, knowledge legitimacy, teaching and study patterns, research patterns, and departmental functioning patterns. Some elements of the advanced approaches to university functioning have already been introduced in Ukrainian academia, for instance, at the National-University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. Thus, only the most contrasting and, therefore, potentially contributing patterns have been illuminated. What is important is that many of the approaches to education are informal and so not reflected in any official documents. Those who practice them perceive them as normal and seldom if ever reflect on them. They become visible when viewed by an external observer coming from a different academic culture and only then can be interpreted and analyzed from a sociological perspective. As far as the research is essentially qualitative, I follow the inductive approach inquiry; firstly interpreting data and only secondly searching for connections with the available theoretical developments.

Transparency

There is a normative discourse of transparency in public institutions and universities are definitely the brightest example of its implementation. What strikes one first visually is that the walls and doors of administrative offices are literally transparent — they are made of glass. Thus, the routine of administrative staff is made visible to any visitor. Office doors are left open almost all the time, especially — during meetings and consultations with students or colleagues.

Convenience for teachers and students

It is implied that appropriate conditions should be created for the sake of efficient study and research. Usefulness starts from such elementary things as class schedules that are available online. Downloadable materials available online are a regular practice. It corresponds with the general trend of intense use of online tools for learning — they might be as unconventional as Facebook group discussions¹. At the level of courses, an elective course is officially established even if it has half a dozen students. I attended such a class and must confess it was very productive. Even regular discussion groups for basic courses have about 12 students each. Graduate, undergraduate, and even high school students can attend the courses. I participated in one: everybody is subject to the same demands and without prior knowledge, and it is difficult to find out who is from which year of study. No wonder then, that professors have keys

from the building that houses their offices and can work inside anytime — even late at night or at weekends. Having access to facilities for work is crucial and it is provided.

Academic freedom

Innovations require large space for creativity and experimenting, and research and teaching are no exception. Therefore, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, course authors have an exceptional right for independent establishment of teaching content and techniques, reflected in syllabi. As inscribed in university documents “courses are designed and conducted in diverse ways”². This also implies that no other professor or administrative staff checks or corrects syllabi, except in exceptional cases, unless there are some complaints from students. Lecturers can modify their syllabi during the semester. One professor asked students about their suggestions. I personally proposed to substitute one topic with another and the very next week there was a vote among course participants. And a simple majority of votes confirmed my proposal, which was implemented within one month of the start of the course. Teachers can flexibly change teaching formats (lecture / seminar / workshop) right within the class, depending on what they find better at the moment. In fact, so many elements of teaching are left for professors and teaching assistants to decide, that they are even not reflected in official documents³.

Academic culture

Some elements of academic culture might seem unusual for representatives of more conformist cultures, where many practices are standardized and inscribed in statutes. On the contrary, in the university that is the subject of this case study the teachers have the right to conduct classes outside university buildings — in a park, for instance, and office consultations — in a café, and it should even be reflected in a syllabus. According to university regulations, “faculty and instructors may require students to attend scheduled meetings of a class... faculty and instructors should inform students in writing at the beginning of each course if there are specific expectations for attendance/participation, including whether any component of the grade is based on such attendance/participation”⁴. Students are not allowed and are strongly prohibited from talking among themselves in the classroom and from using electronic devices for leisure. It is a principle of respect to the teacher, and it is more likely that students adhere in smaller groups and in graduate classes.

² Faculty Legislation. (2014).

³ Wisconsin Statutes. Chapter 36. University of Wisconsin System. (2014).

⁴ Faculty Legislation. (2014).

¹ Dougherty, K.D. & Andercheck, B. (2014), pp. 95-104.

Knowledge legitimacy

Social reality goes far beyond the academic sphere and other media provide society with information too. Thus, it is logical that in the university in question mass media journalist publications are utilized as legitimate sources of information during classes and even suggested in syllabi. For example, newspaper reports, movies, and TV shows can be utilized as pieces of evidence from an external setting¹. Moreover, Wikipedia and analogues like Participedia are also used as permitted sources of knowledge. In fact, according to one piece of research, Wikipedia is almost identical to Encyclopedia Britannica — both of them have a very close percentage of errors². Students are even encouraged to write and add entries to Wikipedia.

Teaching and study patterns

In the University of Wisconsin-Madison students are expected to read literature before lectures, not after. And this is reasonable, as they will remember more and are better prepared to absorb more complex and advanced knowledge. Sometimes students have out-class home assignments in the form of mini-research (observations, experiments, interviews, surveys), even before specialized methodology courses. Thus, they become familiar with empirical fieldwork as early as possible in their course of study. The importance of data gathering is emphasized for comprehension of substantive, qualitative³ as well as quantitative⁴ data, at all levels of the curriculum, including introductory and advanced courses⁵. They can be as interactive and extravagant as role-playing games as simulations of social phenomena⁶. On the other side, some scholars criticize particular fieldwork assignments. For instance, M. Braswell expresses caution that students sometimes do not care enough about breaching experiments' impact on participants⁷. In any case, it is not the sequence of knowledge to practice, but a combination of both, due to which students learn some practical issues and better connect abstract knowledge with their life experience. This conforms to the J. Preissle and K. Roulston perspective, as they advocate iterative approach to learning — essentially regular alterations of theory and fieldwork, which facilitate to reveal common problems and increase understanding of theories and methods⁸.

Research patterns

In American academia the fundamental social norm exists of linking teaching with research.

Indeed, as observed in the university that is the subject of the case study, graduate students are greatly encouraged to conduct empirical research, especially on data collected in person. Theorizing is possible too, but it is definitely a second choice. This approach is explicated in the conclusion that conduction of authentic research projects with all stages from research design through data collection to analysis and peer evaluation are essential for students to acquire comprehension⁹.

In addition, graduate students usually spend up to half of their time working in a research center or teaching as teaching assistants. Thus, they assist professors, gain additional experience, and can join and contribute to a bigger research project, become part of a research team, and establish professional contacts as early as in graduate school. The feedback from some students demonstrates that they appreciate these opportunities.

PhD candidates receive advice about their PhD theses from all members of a defense committee, and not during the defense, but in advance. Therefore, critique of a PhD thesis is not a surprise for a student and he or she has the chance to consider it beforehand and upgrade the paper accordingly. Defense of a PhD thesis is carried out in the department, not at an external institution, by about five professors. The Committee may have the following composition: three experts from the same department, one — from the same field but from another department, and a minimum of one person — from another university. The substantive side is definitely more important than the formal one. For instance, at one defense two of five commission members participated remotely — by video conference format.

Departmental functioning patterns

Professors from post-soviet academia might find administrative approaches in the USA strikingly different. For instance, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison teachers are not obliged to document their academic or private trips outside the town, especially if they do not have to move classes. By default, administrative documents are drawn up by administrative staff, not by professors. Lecturers are encouraged to devote over 40% of their working time to research and publishing articles and books. Teaching is supposed to take up 40% of working time, while participation in conferences, commissions, writing references and the rest — less than 20%. No doubt, such distribution of work time creates better preconditions for academic research.

Challenges

Despite the great number of advanced patterns in academic teaching, research, and administration, there are a number of questionable practices, which

¹ Massengill, R.P. (2011), pp. 371-381.

² Wright, E.O. (2011).

³ Healey-Etten, V. & Sharp, S. (2010), pp. 157-165.

⁴ Strangfeld, J.A. (2013), pp. 199-206.

⁵ Ibid. pp. 200-201.

⁶ Simpson, J.M. & Elias, V.L. (2011), pp. 42-56.

⁷ Braswell, M. (2014), pp. 161-167.

⁸ Preissle, J. & Roulston, K. (2009), p.16.

⁹ Ibid. p. 17.

deserve to be discussed and criticized. As far as it is an American university, much attention is devoted to American society itself. In this respect, the critical remark about teaching introductory sociology made almost thirty years ago is still up-to-date: “perhaps the most significant peculiarity of the course is... its striking lack of any sort of comparative or historical focus”¹. Moreover, it seems that American professors sometimes do not have enough time for research. Teaching, administrative, and other professional responsibilities leave less time than is desired for individual academic research. In addition, despite new innovative teaching strategies available often research instructors «the way they are taught»². Intercultural differences matter too. According to J. Preissle and K. Roulston the teaching of research to students of non-Western cultures faces three challenges: practical and ethical issues of entering a local community; use of data regarding confidentiality and benefit for respondents; conveying meaning in translation³. Finally, there is one characteristic of the American educational system, which is closely connected with the highly valued in the USA individualism⁴. This relates to the privacy of individual grades — for papers, courses, PhD theses. On the one hand, it saves the self-esteem of students as they are protected from comparison with the performance of others. But on the other hand, they lose one more precondition for motivation to realize how they perform with relation to others and to do better. In societies with more pronounced collectivist values, as in post-soviet Ukraine⁵, publicly announced grades are a norm, as is public defense of a PhD thesis. And this opens up possibilities not only for peer criticism, but also for peer support. The latter case is even more telling, as in Ukraine a person publicly defending a PhD might have a dozen close people in the room giving emotional support. This is a benefit of solidarity in a collectivist society. In any case we should treat these values from a cultural relativist perspective — interpreting these phenomena from the viewpoint of people in their respective cultures.

Conclusion

Each of the observed specificities might seem minor; however, all of them demonstrate similar patterns. They are related to convenience, quality, freedom, and responsibility in the academic domain. This is not an easy balance, but it can be reached. For instance, elected courses as part of the Liberal Arts approach were innovatively introduced at Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, and now they are more widespread in Ukrainian academia. The Bologna Process, officially supported by Ukrainian

governments, creates institutional opportunities for acceptance of these principles. Actually, these progressive changes become more probable, as more students and professors participate in study and research programs abroad. And each teacher and administrator can definitely introduce them within their own sphere of responsibility.

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¹ Sanderson, S.K. (1985), p. 397.

² Strayhorn, T.L. (2009), p. 120.

³ Preissle, J. & Roulston, K. (2009), p. 20.

⁴ Inglehart, R. & Welzel, C. (2005).

⁵ Ibid.