

AIM

The aim of this study is to investigate the relations between liberal education and neoliberal reforms in public universities in selected European countries.

“Liberal education” refers to American-inspired, broad, multidisciplinary/general studies, normally at Bachelor level, that expect active engagement of students at all stages of educational process, from curriculum planning to the classroom and beyond. Historically, liberal education was an education offered in liberal arts (*artes liberales*, disciplines “worthy of a free man”), and as such it was limited to a small elite in economic, social and cultural sense. Liberal education alumni were set to play an important role in the society, especially democratic society. In Europe, such broad education largely gave way to disciplinary studies at research-intensive universities during the 19th century, but in 1990s, it has experienced a renaissance in both Eastern and Western part of the continent.

At pretty much the same time, European higher education has entered a phase of pro-market reforms, that were labelled “neoliberal” by their critics. Those reforms were based on an assumption of market primacy in effective allocation of goods, and since universities were put in a position of powerhouses of knowledge economy, market mechanisms were applied to public higher education to ensure economic efficiency. Examples of those mechanisms are increased competition for resources, reduction of public funding and introducing performance-based models, increased accountability and quality assurance including graduate pathways. Intrinsic motivation to engage in research and study have been called into question as they seem contrary to philosophy motivating neoliberal reforms.

This project would investigate the relation between ideals, discourses and practices of liberal education and neoliberal reforms at public universities in Europe.

METHOD

This study would employ ethnographic methods in five case studies of liberal education programs in Western, Central and Eastern Europe to understand how liberal-neoliberal tension is experienced and negotiated by different actors. Are the two ideals fully separate, or do they merge into hybrid forms – if so, which ones and why? Is the concept and practices of liberal education increasingly bend towards neoliberal aims, and if so, how, by who, and how effectively?

Answers to those and similar questions would arise from fieldwork in five liberal education programs in the UK, the Netherlands, Germany, Poland and Russian Federation. Interviews and observations would be conducted, and results would be reflexively compared to literature and initial hypotheses on continuous basis. As a result, a comprehensive picture of selected environments would be constructed, that would allow for a better understanding of the role of liberal education in contemporary universities. The results would be published in three articles submit into indexed journals.

RATIONALE

This research builds upon comparative studies on the diversity of liberal education that I am engaged in since 2012. I am particularly interested in understanding why an ancient, long forgotten ideal suddenly experiences a renaissance in Europe, and how different curricula, organizational models and values are hidden behind a common name. Economic rationale for the rise of liberal education has been suggested in a literature, but without evidence. The ideal of liberal education is a complex one and of long history; perhaps what we experience now, at least in some places, is an increase conceptual and practical accommodation for values that have until recently been considered the exact opposite of liberal education. That would be a fascinating conclusion.