The review of doctoral dissertation

by Tamar Manjavidze, MA,

entitled "Transformation of the Higher Education Domain in the Contemporary World (Theoretical and empirical case studies based on comparative analysis of Georgian and Polish higher education)

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written under supervision of Prof. zw. dr. hab. Zbyszko Melosik

The thesis is a large, theoretical and empirical study of transformation processes of school systems in the contemporary world. The Author made the attempt of analysing current issues, which is equally important for both: educational theory and practice. The multidimensionality of covered issues as well as the extent of undertaken analysis makes the taken action very ambitious and difficult to achieve. The dissertation consists of two, individual (though – to a large extent – complementary) parts. The first one has tried to investigate key factors that have caused the huge changes in the higher education system. The Author focused on finding out the challenges higher education has faced as well as discover how the universities have coped with the rapid changes.

Generally, the first part of the dissertation is an example of a very appropriate analysis. The Author had chosen relevant analytical categories. This enabled her to accomplish a relevant and reliable diagnosis of changes that turbulently take place in higher education systems.

The particular emphasis should be given to the following advantages of that part of the dissertation:

1. Very well selected, current, and a wide range of source literature. The decision of referring to a wide, mainly sociological, theoretical perspective allowed the Author to fulfil the undertaken actions. Among others, finding answers for the following questions: (1). How the
globalization has affected higher education; (2) what is the role of higher education in a globalized world; (3) In what way, in terms of changes that has been taking place, the tension between classical vision of the University (that exposes its culture-making role of a values guardian) and the model of the contemporary University (perceived as a transnational corporation) has been demonstrated; (4) how has the Europe, as a region, adapted to the global requirements; (5) how is the increasing impact of market changing the nature of higher education.

2. The Author demonstrates the ability to navigate the literature. She does not only summarise (as it unfortunately happens very often in doctoral thesis) but she excellently interprets the source literature, and as a result her analysis has got interdisciplinary character / value.

3. The analyses that are placed in the theoretical part of the thesis confirm the fact of acquiring high-level research skills. This is especially demonstrated in the following chapters: History of Higher Education; Traditional Approach to University vs. contemporary Commercialization; Models of University; Globalization as a tendency in a contemporary world; Globalization, Americanization, Europeanization and other External Factors Exerted on Higher Education and their impact on higher education system changes; University re-orientation from the traditional approach to market and business, Changes in research function from true knowledge to business and market.

4. It is worth emphasising that the Author represents very well developed writing skills. The text is "friendly" for a reader, even if she or he is not an expert in terms of undertaken issues. The logical disquisition, the well thought out content arrangement, and the language constitute a narrative, which enables the reader to understand the mechanisms of changes undergoing in higher education system in a wide, not only European perspective. At the same time, reading the dissertation stimulates for reflection on presented, well-documented theses. The dissertation is written in a
form that builds trust to the Author. It gets hold of an impression that the text was written by an expert on this issue.

In the background of that generally highly regarded part of thesis review it is worth – as I believe – considering a few questionable matters. I think, while preparing a future publication, it would be worth stressing the issues strictly related to pedagogy. The example of this may be the chapter titled: Changes in Didactics. Referring to contemporary Adult Learning Theories at this point (for instance: Illeris, Mezirow, Engeström, Gardner etc.) as well as following change of perspective from sociological to educational one may improve the value of the presented work.

Unfortunately, there is a lack of resources in the chapter titled: Marginalization of humanistic and social science. There are many publications that include analyses of both: causes and potential effects of this threatening state of things. Its exemplification may be, among others, the book written by Bill Readings, titled: The University in Ruins (1996).

The Author decided to position the theoretical framework of her research at the beginning of the thesis. These are: academic capitalism, theory of reproduction, structural functionalism, meritocracy and credentialism. In my opinion, they were accurately chosen. Nevertheless, at this point the analyses of the key theories are not needed in the way they were presented. The author summarises them, abandoning the attempt of critical analysis as well as justification of their choice. Choosing a specified theoretical framework is a *sine qua non* condition for qualitative research success. However, there are two important aspects during the theory selection process. First one is the extraordinary mindfulness (reflexivity). The other one is consciousness of the way and the moment a researcher refers to the theory.

In further research projects and during preparing the publication (what I suggest to do) I would recommend the Author being far bolder – than it appears in the doctoral thesis pages – in referring to the critical perspective in research of undergoing changes in higher education. Referring to the critical analysis of findings of numerous conducted, in recent times, empirical research as well as choosing the transdisciplinary methodological
perspective, which enters into *mode-2 science* may affect the Author's further accomplishments.

The second part of the thesis, which is devoted to analysis of conducted empirical research, consists of two chapters. These are chapters: four – entitled *Case studies – Georgian and Polish higher education* and five – *Students from Georgia and Poland and their perception of university functions. The results of qualitative research.*

The chapter four was devoted to analysis of the context of the educational scene, which allowed understanding and interpretation of data collected during conducted interviews. The interviews were presented in chapter five. That kind of procedure is essential in case studies research. Its assumption is a holistic analysis of researched “objects” situated in a specific place and time. I have no objections for the applied method (desk research) as well as for the value of analysis conducted that way. They are justified and grounded in data, which were presented in the first, “theoretical” part of the dissertation.

The collected data, derived from conducted empirical research, were presented in chapter five. These were interviews carried out amongst 16 Polish and Georgian students. In the process of conducting interviews, the Author was trying to find the answers for six, detailed research questions:

1. How Georgian and Polish students perceived the choice of the future profession and their career after graduation?
2. How Georgian and Polish students perceive the role of university in providing society in intellectual elite or educate in an egalitarian way?
3. To what extent Georgian and Polish students think that university should create the pure knowledge which cannot be immediately applied or knowledge which is immediately useful in practice?
4. To what extent Georgian and Polish students see the university as creating economic and human capital for society or “creating” independently thinking intellectuals?
5. What, according to Georgian and Polish students, are their university’s greatest strengths and weaknesses in the confrontation with their imagined ideal university?
6. To what extent do Georgian and Polish students consider their university credential valuable for the contemporary labor market? The list of those questions arranged the structure of the chapter as well as the order of presented contents in it. The particular emphasis should be given to:

- Intuition in choosing research issues and the way of formulating research problems in terms of strict methodological rigours. On the grounds of qualitative character of research and the lack of possibility of generalisation, I would only advise the Author not to use the phrase Polish and Georgian students but the phrase – researched Polish and Georgian students or Polish and Georgian narrators,

- choosing adequate research strategy in terms of research objectives and issues (collective case study),

- high level of competencies in the interview designing and conducting it as well as – to some extent – in presenting its results.

However, there is a wide array of disputable matters in the thesis. They refer to particular methodological solutions applied by the Author in the project. The Author resigned from a traditional, extended chapter (the existing one has got 4 pages altogether), in which she justifies her decisions in the matter of chosen research objective and subject matter, selection of a research model, research strategy, and sampling – especially – chosen methods and procedures that were employed during analysis of gathered data.

It is good that the Author was able to avoid – the very often-encountered in doctoral thesis – mannerism of definitions quoting and summarising the methodological handbooks. It gives a good testimony of her maturity. However, in terms of a reviewer's duty, I am obliged to pose some questions and to give some suggestions addressed directly to the Author. The first one refers to the matter related to methodological sources selection, which was the basis of the project. Although, referring to Creswell's, Stake's, Strauss's and Corbin's, Taylor's, and Seidman's works is accurate, it is insufficient here. I believe that reaching for significant, "canonical" texts that relates to case study R. Yin's, R. Stake's (The art of
case study research) or for the excellent, dedicated to doctoral students, recently published handbook of H. Simons Case Study Research in Practice (2009) would allow the Author to avoid a lot of traps during the process of empirical data analysis (in that specific project this would be exposing and justification of the chosen data analysis methods).

The other things are confusing justification of using qualitative research model and paradigm settling of the project. This might have been moderated by a careful reading of the excellent book of D. Mertens — Research and Evaluation in Educational and Psychology (2010).

Considering the earlier mentioned lacks in the methodological and empirical chapters of the thesis, during the doctoral defence I would expect the doctoral student to answer the following questions:

1. The essence of case study is that it is always set as a bounded system. My question is: how the case boundaries were defined here?

2. Qualitative research is often a starting point for broad-based quantitative investigations. So, what other issues/matters may be undertaken in the future research — in the basis of the accomplished project?

The primary responsibility of a reviewer is referring to the value of presented work. In my opinion, the dissertation of Tamar Manjavidze’s, MA, - Transformation of the Higher Education Domain in the Contemporary World deserves a positive assessment. The following aspects determine this:

1. The undertaken research issue, which is exceedingly interesting, significant and current for both: educational theory and practice.

2. The way the project was developed testifies to the Author's maturity, high level of theoretical competencies, and research mastery, which are sufficient to execute ambitious research project.

3. The doubts and questions that were indicated in the review are the natural component of scientific disputation, which may have a chance to resound during the public defence of the doctoral thesis. Moreover, their character does not disqualify the value of the thesis.
Given all these arguments and remarks, I conclude that dissertation submitted by Tamar Manjavidze, MA, titled "Transformation of the Higher Education Domain in the Contemporary World (Theoretical and empirical case studies based on comparative analysis of Georgian and Polish higher education)" meets the statutory requirements for doctoral dissertation (both on basis of content and formally) and the candidate will be allowed to proceed to the next stages of doctoral procedures.

Olsztyn, 2018-02-27