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Postmodernism and the Perspectives of University Education

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Abstract: The article reveals the use of postmodernism as a style of thinking and a special view of contemporaneity as an interpretive basis for understanding present-day university education and understanding the prospects for its development in new conditions. The emphasis is based on three characteristics of the postmodern paradigm: change in the status of knowledge in society; non-structural, non-linear way of organizing integrity, excluding rigid centralization, orderliness and symmetry; a special model of contemporaneity, which does not allow the imposition of life guidelines and values on a person.
It is shown that the situation of postmodernism has led to new phenomena in university education, which have changed the traditional status and mission of the university. There was a tendency towards the mass character of university education, which, by expanding accessibility, contributed to a decrease in its quality. The change in the status of knowledge in society has led to the commercialization of education, which puts on threat the academic freedom and autonomy of the university, which becomes dependent on the "order" for educational services. Teaching strategies and educational strategies of students are changing; the level of their interconnection and interdependence is decreasing.
It is noted that the modernization of higher education determines the formation of a new university – the university at risk and actualizes the task of predicting systematically emerging risks and dangers and developing measures to level or limit their negative impacts.

Keywords: *postmodernism, university education, mass character, commercialization, teaching strategy, student educational strategy, university at risk.*

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Introduction

Present-day university education is going through difficult times. In recent decades, more and more often voices are heard about the crisis and even the death of the classical university, which, according to many experts, is not able to respond adequately and timely to the profound transformations in social life, to a radical change in the social order for higher education.

This was lamented by Ronald Barnett, for example, in his inaugural professorial lecture at the Institute of Education, University of London, on October 25, 1997. In his view, the Western University is dead, though this is hard to believe. At the same time, while stating the death of the university, R. Barnett expressed hope for its resurrection, since history speaks of the extraordinary ability of this institution to renew itself and adapt to new conditions. This, the scholar thought, is what makes it possible to hope that once again a miracle will happen and a new university will emerge (Theoretical question of education, 2013). R. Barnett concluded that under present conditions ("in the age of supercomplexity") the university would not lose its legitimacy. A new epistemology awaits it – open, bold, interesting, accessible and aware of its own insecurities – an epistemology of living under uncertainty (Barnett, 2000).

Bill Readings in his eloquently titled "The University in Ruins" (1996) also acknowledged in fact that the university, as we know it, had ceased to exist. However, B. Ridings did not fall into pessimism and also believed that the contemporary university is capable of overcoming another "crisis of identity" (Readings, 1996).

L. Wheatley expresses a similar position, arguing that traditional North American universities, which have served a "uniformed society", must reevaluate their means and purposes in order to meet new demands, standards, and expectations if they hope to remain a pillar of an ever-evolving society (Wheatley, 2021).

The list of publications in which scholars from different countries draw attention to the crisis state of present-day university education could be continued. However, this does not make much sense, because experts are unanimous in saying that Wilhelm Humboldt's model of the classical university, which was based on a combination of three basic principles (fundamental orientation of learning; academic freedom; unity of research and educational activity), does not correspond to present times. With the growth of a knowledge-based economy and the development of new models of knowledge production, there is a need to reconsider the institutional

mission of universities and justify new approaches to the formation of educational content and the choice of forms, methods, and technologies of education. It is much more important to understand what changes in the economy and social life are undermining the time-tested and seemingly unshakable foundations of the classical university.

In our opinion, postmodernism, the emergence of which is due to the changing status of knowledge in society, has not lost its importance as an interpretive basis for understanding contemporary university education, comprehension of the prospects of its development in the new conditions. Scholars from different countries of the world recognize the significant influence of postmodernism on the state and development of higher education. Harland G. Bloland pointed out that postmodern ideas, penetrated into the core of American culture, cause postmodernist attacks not only on modernism, but also on the system of higher education (Bloland, 1995). Frank Webster called for an awareness of the postmodern shift in university education (Webster, 2001). Peter Scott argued that postmodernism is a useful idea that has a direct impact on the university (Scott, 2012).

Postmodernism

Most often, the university and the system of higher education in general are viewed as a product of modernism, and its "death" is associated with a kind of antithesis to the modernist paradigm – postmodernism. It should be noted that postmodernism is one of the most complex and controversial phenomena of recent decades. Its significance as a socio-cultural phenomenon is keenly disputed by scholars. Critics see postmodernism as a transient intellectual fashion, which is outdated and has lost its relevance, and postmodern ideas, in their opinion, can be used only in such areas as aesthetics, literature, etc.

The term "postmodernism" itself is difficult to define, since it is based on a variety of theories and styles of thinking. Perhaps the only thing that can be said about it definitely is that postmodernism is both a historical period that followed the dominance of modernism in the theory and practice of culture, and a set of ideas and values. Therefore, it can only be understood in connection with an equally complex phenomenon called "modernism".

Modernism should also be seen, first, as a historical era in the European culture, which covers the period from the early eighteenth to the last third of the twentieth century, and, secondly, as an image of society and

culture, a kind of worldview and methodological project based on rationality as the foundation of transformation and endless renewal.

Among the most important characteristics of modernism, we have identified the following: 1) rationality, or rather, instrumental rationality – the ability to turn the procedures and methods of human mind into the most precise tools of knowledge and transformation of the surrounding world and man himself; 2) universality, manifested in the form of a firm conviction that there is a certain common, unifying origin in the world, a certain invariant (matter or spirit) that can bring to a common denominator the diversity of the surrounding reality; 3) belief in progress, the conviction that history is steadily advancing towards a more and more perfect, just and dignified state, towards the heights of goodness, truth, and beauty (Vakhovskyi, 2010, Vakhovskyi et al., 2021).

Postmodernism denies the fundamental ideas and values of modernism because it was born as a challenge to several modernist themes that were first articulated in the Age of Enlightenment (Salberg et al., 2009).

As Brian Duignan pointed out, what is rejected above all is the idea of an objective natural reality whose existence and properties are logically independent of people – of their minds, social structures, social practices or research methods. According to postmodernists, existing reality is a conceptual construction, an artifact of scientific practice and language. Assertions about the truth of scientific knowledge, about science and technology as tools of human and social change for the better, about the universality of reason and logic, about heredity as a factor in personality formation, about the ability of language, which is semantically self-sufficient or self-referential, to represent external reality are questioned. The possibility and necessity of constructing general theories ("metanarratives") explaining many aspects of the natural or social world within a particular field of knowledge are denied (Duignan, 2020).

Craig Browne emphasized that postmodernism is also understood as a way of thinking that rejects many of the central tenets of present-day Western rationality. A somewhat different view of rationality was conditioned by a revision of the category of "ideology", an assessment of the ideological distortion of rationality and self-reflection. Yet postmodernism, which initially hinted at a different version of rationality, never developed a relatively coherent judgment of it (Browne, 2010).

Let us note that the focus on revealing and critiquing epistemological and ideological motives in the social sciences, as well as the increased attention to the factors contributing to the production of knowledge, is seen as the greatest achievement of postmodernism. The advantages of

postmodernism also include a self-reflexive attitude towards modes of social knowledge production, as well as a general skepticism about the objectivity and authority of scientific knowledge, which leads to polyphony, the emergence of a "voice of the other", i.e. the recognition that there are many versions of the reality or truths.

Postmodern ideas have been and are repeatedly criticized by representatives of various branches of science. In the context of our study, we should pay attention to the criticisms made by P. Greenfield, who believes that a complete denial of objectivity and a tendency to promote political agendas make postmodernism practically useless in any scientific research (Greenfield, 2000). Bob McKinley, too, is convinced that postmodernism is not a science and that its emergence was largely a Western emphasis on individualism (McKinley, 2000). Postmodernism's rejection of all "summative" theories has also been criticized (Boyne & Rattansi, 1990).

There exist numerous generalizations about the characteristics, strengths and weaknesses of postmodernism, which is seen as an "intellectual movement", "worldview", "state of society", "strategy of creativity", etc. Scholars emphasize that the characteristics of postmodernism are eclectic, vague, ambiguous and cause methodological uncertainty. However, it is important to pay attention to those features of this socio-cultural phenomenon, which allow us to understand the reasons for transformations in present-day university education.

It is well known that famous European and American scholars M. Heidegger, F. Guattari, J. Deleuze, J. Derrida, F. Jameson, J. Lyotard, R. Rorty, M. Foucault and others were engaged in the development of theoretical foundations of postmodernism. We believe that, first, when analyzing the state and prospects of the development of present-day university education, it is appropriate to refer to the work of J.-F. Lyotard "The State of the Postmodern", in which postmodernism is associated primarily with "the state of knowledge in contemporary most developed societies" (Lyotard, 1979). The author came to the conclusion that in the second half of the twentieth century the status of knowledge in society changed significantly, and as a type of discourse it became dependent on "information machines" that radically influenced the practice of its dissemination. As a consequence, the old principle that the acquisition of knowledge is inseparable from the formation of the mind and even the personality itself is becoming obsolete and falling out of use. The relationship between "suppliers" and "users" of knowledge tends to take the form of a relationship between a producer and a consumer, that is, to acquire a monetary form. Knowledge, according to J.-F. Lyotard, is and will

be produced in order to be sold, and is and will be consumed in order to acquire value in a new product (ibid.).

This "state of knowledge" in the society obviously affects the university education as well. The educational institution in this situation will worry primarily about knowledge being sold, and its efficiency as a factor in the formation of the student's personality recedes into the background.

Secondly, it is important to pay attention to another feature of postmodernism – a non-structural, non-linear way of organizing integrity, to describe which Deleuze and Guattari use the term "rhizome", borrowed from botany, which is quite specific for postmodernist discourse. There it means a certain construction of the root system, characterized by the absence of a central pivotal root and consisting of many unforeseen in its development shoots, which chaotically intertwine, periodically die off and regenerate. They sprawl, overcome obstacles, and are difficult to eradicate, as each section of the root system gives life to a new plant. In postmodernism, the "rhizome", unlike such a metaphor as the "tree" with its root system, main trunk, branches, etc., is an image of a world without centralization, order and symmetry. J. Deleuze and F. Guattari tried to substantiate the principles of rhizome as a way to organize integrity: the principle of combination and heterogeneity; the principle of multiplicity; the principle of cartography and decalconomy, etc (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988).

Thirdly, postmodernism interprets the concept of "contemporaneity" in a specific way and, in fact, offers its own model of contemporaneity. From the perspective of the postmodern approach, contemporaneity is associated with the onset of an era of awareness of the brokenness of the world, the lack of being in it and the treatment of it as a text. Contemporaneity is also an epoch of liberation of the individual from all cultural ties (including education) in view of their presentation as instruments of enslavement. In this regard, the world appears to be only a chaotic set of signs, and the free man is deprived of (and is not supposed to have) life orientations (Lagunova, 2017).

Thus, when using postmodernism as an interpretive basis for understanding present-day university education and comprehending the prospects of its development in new conditions, we will take into account at least three of its characteristics: a) the changing status of knowledge in society; b) non-structural, non-linear way to organize integrity, excluding rigid centralization, order and symmetry; c) special model of contemporaneity, in which life guidelines and values are not imposed on man.

University in situation of postmodernism

It is obvious that the university as a scientific and social institution was formed in the coordinates of modernism and remained rather a conservative community for a long time. This was manifested not only in the preservation and multiplication of university traditions (corporate insignia, festive rituals and ceremonies, etc.), but also in approaches to the formation of the educational content and the organization of the educational activity, the style of relations between the participants of the educational process and, above all, between professors and students.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s there were clear signals of a crisis in the system of higher education, the most striking manifestation of which were the mass demonstrations of students in France, which went down in history as the "events of May 1968". The causes of the so-called student revolution were not only the socio-economic and political situation in the country, but also students' dissatisfaction with the conditions of education, conservatism of education and morals, the authoritarian model of government and society. By the end of the 60s the number of students in France had risen sharply, while teaching in universities was carried out by conservative professors who were unable to respond adequately to the changes that were taking place. As a consequence, university education was no longer a "social elevator" capable of moving an individual to the upper floors of the social pyramid. It was at this time that a new socio-political mechanism of interaction between the society and the government took shape, and new universities were formed in accordance with the Law on Orientation of Higher Education of November 12, 1968 (Rodin, 2015).

The Law on Orientation, adopted in the face of mass student protests, which set a course towards "autonomy", "participation", and "multidisciplinarity", radically changed the organization and structure of French higher education. It involved not only a reorganization of the internal structure of universities, but also the division of all the major universities, which had become virtually unmanageable because of their huge enrollments, into independent universities of a rational size (System of higher education of western countries, 1991).

As we can see, one of the most important factors in changing the mission of the university and its status in society was a sharp increase in the number of students, the desire of European states to ensure the mass nature of higher education. The initiator of this process can be considered the British economist, chairman of the British Higher Education Committee in the 60s of the twentieth century, Lord Robbins, who justified the principle of egalitarianism, which implied ensuring equality in receiving higher

education. The British scholar believed that higher education should be available to all who have the necessary abilities and knowledge and wish to obtain it (Robbins, 1966).

The expansion of access to university education, the trend towards its mass character, as well as the spread of information technology and globalization, have increased the attention of international organizations and, above all, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization – UNESCO – to higher education. It was no longer the realization of a "crisis of the identity of the university" within one country, but on an international scale, and the need for a radical revision of its goals and objectives. In 1995, UNESCO published the strategy document "Reform and Development of Higher Education" and in 1998 the World Conference on Higher Education adopted the "World Declaration on Higher Education for the 21st Century: Approaches and Practical Measures", which presented a global plan of action to deepen the reform of higher education.

The World Declaration explicitly stated that the second half of the twentieth century was the period of the most rapid development of higher education (between 1960 and 1995 the number of students in all countries increased more than six-fold: from 13 million to 82 million). This period was also characterized by a growing gap between industrialized and developing countries in terms of access to higher education and research, resources, growing socio-economic stratification and differences in educational opportunities within countries, including the most developed ones (World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century, 1998). In order to create "adequate higher education" capable of forming a "critical mass of qualified and educated people", it was proposed to establish knowledge sharing, international cooperation and new technologies. A new approach to higher education presupposed: equitable access to higher education; increased participation and role of women; advancement of knowledge through scientific research; a long-term focus on relevance; strengthened cooperation with the world of labor; diversification of higher education models, forms and criteria for admission; innovative approaches in education, critical thinking and creativity (ibid.).

Obviously, the trend towards mass university education was connected with the postmodern manifestations in the social life of Western countries (new ideas of integrity, which exclude strict hierarchy, rigid centralization, orderliness; new information situation, which expands access to knowledge). On the one hand, this trend corresponded to the expectations of society, but on the other hand, it created crisis phenomena

in the activities of universities and, above all, a decrease in the quality of education. Requirements for student admission were lowered, approaches to the selection of teaching material, the choice of forms and methods of teaching were changed (students, brought up on the samples of mass culture, instead of painstaking and thoughtful academic work, were offered an educational process built on the models of entertainment TV programs), the number of higher educational institutions with poor material and technical facilities, low qualification of lecturers, low motivation of students, which were only able to "imitate" higher education, grew.

It should be noted that the mass character of university education, especially in developing countries, was determined not only by the needs of the economy, but also by the so-called social demand for higher education. A university degree became a fashionable attribute, an indicator of social prestige, a kind of marker of an individual's social reputation. For example, in many post-Soviet countries social demand, contrary to the needs of the labor market, provoked an overproduction of lawyers and economists. In general, at the present stage there is a discrepancy between the needs of the market and the palette of specialists that universities produce. This can be explained both by inadequate state educational policy (issuing licenses for unclaimed but popular specialties, formal accreditation, etc.) and by the position of higher educational institutions, which, while providing educational services, ignore the situation on the labor market.

Some experts believe that the boom in higher education is fading, as it is no longer a competitive advantage when applying for a job. In our opinion, the decrease in the number of students is primarily due to demographic reasons, whereas higher education continues to be perceived by the population as a success factor that gives the opportunity to achieve economic prosperity in the future with a university degree.

As we have already noted, the mass nature of university education, firstly, leads to a decrease in its quality. As a consequence, universities, which occupy the highest places in world rankings, focus on applicants with a high level of training and high motivation and continue to form the intellectual elite. At the same time, a considerable part of higher educational institutions with poor material and technical facilities and weak personnel largely "imitate" higher education. Secondly, a peculiar "victim" of the unjustified growth in the number of university students is the system of professional education, which is experiencing a serious crisis.

In the situation of postmodernity, when the status of knowledge in the society changes and it acquires a value form, university education turns into a market of educational services, which contributes to its

commercialization. The subordination of science and education to the laws of the market economy and their marketization leads to the degradation of the classical university, emasculating its traditional mission and imposing alien tasks and functions. As Ye. Strogetskaya notes, a new cognitive matrix of information retrieval prevails in present-day conditions, which can be denoted as "ordering". Its epistemological significance manifests itself in the necessity of constructing the characteristics of an object in accordance with the needs of the customer. The dominance of this cognitive matrix in the context of deficit financing of higher education makes it impossible for a contemporary university to be autonomous. If the state guarantees universities protection from business, it strictly determines their functioning and development, and vice versa, if business helps universities to get rid of the state tutelage, it dictates its own conditions of existence (Strogetskaya, 2010).

A university as a business project, an "entrepreneurial" (Clark, 1998) or "pragmatic" university (Karie, 1996) is unable to realize one of the basic principles of university education – fundamentality – and forces the need to produce utilitarian knowledge.

As we can see, in the conditions of commercialization, university science and teaching are aimed not at finding the truth and passing on the system of scientific knowledge, but at creating the scientific and educational products needed by the society.

In a postmodern situation characterized by uncertainty and unpredictability, in which it is impossible to teach a profession "for a lifetime", teaching and learning strategies (educational strategies of lecturers and students) change dramatically.

In the traditional model of education, teaching and learning strategies were interconnected and interdependent: the lecturer offered a system of scientific knowledge, which the student had to master. This ensured that the student reached a given level of professional training and contributed to the formation of a scientific worldview. In the situation of postmodernism, the educational strategies of the participants of the educational process are unbalanced. This is connected with the change of the relationship between a lecturer and a student, which turns from the traditional, assuming the leading role of a lecturer, into an equal dialogue and "symmetrical relationship". Active, interactive, creative methods and forms of learning become a priority, information technologies are widely used, digitalization of education takes place, which also significantly changes the educational landscape. The issue of individual learning trajectory is raised,

which allows the student to choose the content, forms and methods, and even the pace of learning.

In other words, a profound transformation in the organization of university education is observed, new sources of information are used, new principles of student enrollment and faculty selection are worked out, and new approaches to stimulation and motivation of cognitive activity are improved. The educational environment is radically changed and the transition is made from a "closed" to an "open" type of education system, shifting the emphasis to the creation of a person capable of learning over the course of a lifetime.

The seemingly positive changes taking place mean that teaching strategies and students' educational strategies are often in opposition and no longer reinforce each other, which creates risks, contributes to a "space of conflict" and undoubtedly reduces the quality of education.

Conclusions

Postmodernism as a style of thinking and a special view of contemporaneity can be used as an interpretive basis for understanding the current state of university education and comprehending the prospects of its development. At the same time, postmodern positions on the change in the status of knowledge in the society, non-structural, non-linear way of integrity organization, excluding rigid centralization, ordering and symmetry, a special model of contemporaneity, not allowing the imposition of life guidelines and values on the person, become of great importance.

The results of this study can be represented as several key points characterizing the changes in the traditional status of the university and the direction of its transformation in the situation of postmodernism.

1. The tendency to mass university education, which, on the one hand, corresponded to society's expectations and, on the other hand, objectively contributed to a decrease in its quality, has become persistent. Mass accessibility undermined the idea of the exclusivity of the university as a phenomenon of intellectual life, reducing its potential as a factor of social mobility. The reaction to the mass character of higher education was the formation of a pyramid of universities, at the top of which are the most prestigious educational institutions that continue to fulfill the function of reproduction of the elite.

2. The change in the status of knowledge in the society, the acquisition of the value form of knowledge contributes to the commercialization of education, turning the university into a "market place", which also has ambiguous consequences. Academic freedom (the right to

present the subject at the lecturer's own discretion, to determine research topics and methodology) and the autonomy of the university, which becomes dependent on the "order" for educational services, are threatened. Applied research becomes a priority, to the detriment of fundamental research, which has no immediate benefits.

3. In the situation of postmodernism with its uncertainty and unpredictability, teaching and learning strategies (educational strategies of students) change, their interrelation and interdependence decrease. The lecturer loses the leading role in the teaching process and performs mainly the functions of a facilitator. This objectively expands the independence of students in the learning process, who, however, are often not ready for "freedom of choice", i.e. to determine and efficiently implement an individual learning trajectory.

Obviously, the modernization of higher education, as well as the modernization of the society as a whole, generates risks. To paraphrase Ulrich Beck (2010), we can say that today we are witnessing the emergence of a new university, a university at risk. There is no point in making value judgments along the line of "good-bad" in this regard. It is important to predict not only the efficiency of the reforms in university education, but also the systematic risks and dangers that arise, and most importantly, to provide for measures to level out or limit their negative impacts.

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The authors' contribution to the conducted study:

Leonid Vakhovskyi – the formulation of the research topic, substantiation of its relevance, structure, comparative analysis of modernism and postmodernism, writing the text of the article.

Oleksandr Babichev – collecting data reflecting changes in the strategy of contemporary universities, approaches to the implementation of educational activities.

Tetiana Ivchenko – summarizing the material reflecting the characteristic features of postmodernism as an image of the society and culture, a peculiar worldview and methodological project.

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