

Stalin and Contemporary Higher Education Change: a Short Provocation

Sophia Howlett

Sophia Howlett is dean in Special and Extension Programs and on the faculty of the Department of Public Policy and Department of Gender Studies, at the Central European University, Budapest, Hungary, and visiting scholar at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. E-mail: howletts@ceu.hu.

Over the past 30 years a university has been pushed to “leave its ivory tower,” “come down to earth,” and pursue “innovation.” Academics know what they are supposed to do: make education more applicable to societies’ needs, be more practice driven, change classrooms to be student centered, expand student numbers to supply knowledge workers, and connect to the world of work.

Contemporary higher education policy has become a dogma: difficult to question without sounding like some conservative who cannot live in the “real world.” But when policy starts sounding like dogma or a moral imperative, this is exactly when academics should be asking questions. The alternative is a captured higher education sector: with no critical distance, existing simply as an arm of state policy.

Here is a parallel: in the USSR Josef Stalin used similar policies as today. This is a surprising historical connection, but also a common ground. Stalin was attempting rapid industrialization; today, states want to move to a knowledge

economy. Stalin wanted universities to become instruments for state policy. Through both direct and indirect methods of control, European universities, for instance, are increasingly in the same situation.

In the USSR, the end result was universities directly under state control; research separated from the teaching process; classrooms dedicated to bringing in and pushing out students as quickly as possible, with a specific set of technical competencies; and stunted development of disciplines that threatened to critique the state's policy values.

BACK IN THE USSR

In 1929, Stalin began an ambitious plan for rapid industrialization. Recognizing the importance of higher education for this process, Stalin fundamentally remodelled the sector. A substantial group of educated individuals were needed for industrialization, requiring a rapid increase in graduates, especially in the technical fields. So, from the early 1930s onward Soviet higher education underwent rapid massification. But Stalin's plans also required graduates to be quickly available. The big, broad aims of a German fundamental education were removed. Degrees became shorter and focused toward skills development in a specified vocational field. Time of study to a degree was shortened from five or more years to three or four. Specializations (degree programs) became increasingly specific so that students could fully learn a technical skill in the shortened period.

Understandably, the number of higher education institutions multiplied rapidly. But the state primarily supported alternatives to the universities—institutes, pedagogical colleges, and technical schools, which fulfilled a practical

function providing vocational degrees for the needs of the economy. Many were directly affiliated with a particular ministry or economic enterprise. What would now be called research-intensive universities became a small group within the overall sector. Indeed, research was predominantly moved out of the universities.

The world of work was to be an integral feature of student life, with an emphasis on practice in the Soviet curriculum and classroom. Finally, the formation of curriculum, the knowledge, skills, and competencies required for each specialization, the writing of textbooks, and even the development of specific courses became increasingly centralized as the state took charge. These reforms were highly problematic. Some disappeared quickly, and others—such as the emphasis on narrow technical skills—continued and led to atrophy in other disciplines, especially the social sciences and humanities, out-of-control multiplication of increasingly narrow subdisciplines, and a problematic connection between Soviet education and research.

Did Stalin achieve his policy goals? Certainly there was rapid though very patchy industrialization. Long-term scientific advancement, even in technical disciplines, was, however, not doing well. The state captured the sector but in doing so undermined scientific and technical development—the very areas it hoped to cultivate.

YESTERDAY TODAY

Today, once again, rapid modernization has become a priority. The knowledge economy has prompted transnational change processes—such as the Lisbon agenda and the Bologna process and individual state initiatives impacting higher

education. Stalin's policies are being repeated: massification; the movement to shorter, skills-based degrees with an emphasis on knowledge application to the real world; internships; promotion of technical subjects; movement toward team learning; the importance of university/world of work relations; and responsiveness of higher education to state interests.

Of course, the stories behind the parallel are more complex and further questions are possible. Do large-scale shifts in economic goals, for instance, require large-scale reorganization of higher education? Or do such shifts simply provide an opportunity for a state to reconfigure power relations with the universities? And what about the specific issues: the benefits of active pedagogy and the role of skills-based education?

The example of Stalin also reveals that the university as "ivory tower" belongs mainly to fairy tales, as does the rhetoric of "innovation." Higher education has always been to a greater or lesser extent a part of state policy. Sometimes it has been pushed to serve—for instance, under Stalin—and at others there has been a meeting of minds such as in Humboldt's plan for the University of Berlin when he was minister of education.

Contemporary policy thinking is not a moral imperative for a university out of touch with the real world; nor is to critique such thinking a conservative reaction to change. Policies are simply tools for a state to obtain its specific ends. They are also an act of experimentation, for good or bad. There are genuine questions to be asked here, both about then and now—including one concerning the productivity of a "captured" sector. After all, unlike our colleagues under Stalin, academics are free to ask.