

Were academic promotions in biochemistry and other research disciplines improperly controlled in Poland between 2011 and 2020?

A response to the recently published “Who controls the national academic promotion system” article

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In the recently published article by Koza *et al.* (SAGE Open, 2023, 13, doi: 10.1177/21582440231177974), the authors analyzed the academic promotion system in Poland between 2011 and 2020. They concluded that “the Polish system of academic promotions in the past decade can hardly be regarded as based on pure merit”, suggesting the impropriety, based on the participation of the members of the Central Board for Degrees and Titles in panels of experts evaluating the applications. Biochemistry was provided as a research discipline in which such an “impropriety” was the most pronounced, though other disciplines were only slightly less “improperly affected”. Although the calculations presented by Koza and others (Koza *et al.*, 2023) were proper, their conclusions were affected by fundamental errors in assessing the roles of the panelists and misinterpretation of the data. The drawbacks of the interpretations of the facts and in drawing conclusions are presented and discussed in this paper, underlining the necessity of being very careful when assessing any phenomenon and concluding about any mechanism. Indeed, only very well substantiated conclusions, strongly supported by objective data, should be published. This rule is very well known in biochemistry and other exact and natural sciences, and should be mandatory in all other research disciplines.

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INTRODUCTION: THE ANALYSIS OF THE ACADEMIC PROMOTION SYSTEM IN POLAND, PERFORMED BY KOZA ET AL. (2023)

There are various systems of academic promotion operating in different countries. Their analyses might show interesting processes, and could indicate strengths and weaknesses of such systems which then could be improved.

The academic promotion system, used in Poland between 2011 and 2020, was recently analyzed by Koza and others (Koza *et al.*, 2023). The authors presented the system, based on two degrees, PhD and habilitation, and the title of professor. During the analyzed period of time, the procedures of academic promotions were over-

seen by the central (national) body called Central Board for Degrees and Titles (henceforth Central Board). In habilitation procedures, the crucial role was played by the habilitation panel, composed of the president, secretary, three reviewers, and two ordinary members. In the procedures of processing the professorship applications, the Central Board indicated five reviewers.

The analysis of the members of habilitation panels and reviewers of the professorship applications, led Koza and others (Koza *et al.*, 2023) to the conclusion that “the Polish system of academic promotions in the past decade can hardly be regarded as based on pure merit”. In their opinion, members of the Central Board were too often members of habilitation panels, and thus they “controlled a substantial majority of academic promotions beyond the PhD degree”. They also stated that they “found that this relatively small group of academics held dominant control over academic promotions by repeatedly serving on promotion panels”. The analyses presented in their article indicated that biochemistry was one of the most “affected” research disciplines, and the members of the Central Board were present in 100% habilitation panels, mostly as presidents of these panels (Supplementary Table S3 in Koza *et al.*, 2023). Nevertheless, a similar tendency was observed in most other disciplines (Koza *et al.*, 2023).

The above-mentioned conclusions might indicate that the Polish academic promotion system “is appropriated by the so-called old boys”, and that there are mechanisms “used to distribute power and prestige among those old boys”. Such conclusions are strong, but the question is whether they are substantiated. Unfortunately, the analysis of the work by Koza and others (Koza *et al.*, 2023) indicated that the authors made several fundamental errors in interpretation of the data and even in describing the system which severely influenced their conclusions, making them unsubstantiated. Below, I will present the most important errors showing the crucial problems with the above-mentioned conclusions. I suppose that as a former member of the Central Board (abbreviated by Koza and others (Koza *et al.*, 2023) as ‘CK’) and current President of the Research Excellence Council (the successor of the Central Board), I have a sufficient knowledge about the system of academic promotion in Poland and I am qualified and commissioned to professionally comment on the work analyzing this system.

MAJOR ERRORS, MISINTERPRETATIONS, AND UNSUBSTANTIATED CONCLUSIONS

Let me describe shortly the major weaknesses and drawbacks of the analyses performed by Koza and others (Koza *et al.*, 2023). First, the authors informed that: “CK members are elected by other senior academics” seemingly overlooking that the members of the Central Board were chosen by other researchers in the procedure of democratic election form all scientists with the title of professor. It should be highlighted that in each research discipline all scientists with the title of professor could cast their votes. Therefore, one should assume that they were recognized as leaders in specific research disciplines, and persons who are able to oversee the academic promotion processes objectively. In other words, they obtained the mandate of trust as scientists who were elected to ensure the correctness of the procedures. Koza and others (Koza *et al.*, 2023) did not mention that this relatively small group of persons was responsible for proposing reviewers for all habilitation and professorship procedures which was an especially hard and responsible task. If so, this may put the members of the Central Board in a different light, in contrast to the statement of Koza and others (Koza *et al.*, 2023) suggesting that they were the group of “old boys”, keeping the strong power in their hands, and acting for their own purposes. In my opinion, this is a totally improper suggestion, presented by Koza and others (Koza *et al.*, 2023). Members of the Central Board had no interest in promoting one researcher and declining application of another apart from ensuring that all requirements for the promotion are fulfilled to guarantee that academic degrees and titles were awarded to researchers having appropriate achievements. In contrast, the “old boys” model should only be valid if the members of such a group had personal interest in making specific decisions.

The errors found in the paper by Koza and others (Koza *et al.*, 2023) include even a wrong description of the habilitation panel (further used as the major model in their analyses). They wrote “Of these seven panel members, three were pre-selected by the degree-granting university: the secretary, one of the referees, and one ordinary member” which is true. However, in the next sentence they stated: “The CK selected the other four: the chair, two referees, and two ordinary members” which is an evident error, as 1 chair, 2 referees, and 2 ordinary members would mean five, not four, members selected by CK. Obviously, this error is not crucial for further analyses, but indicates imprecision and inattention of the authors in performing and describing their work.

The serious erroris, however, a lack of the information that each member of the panel had a single vote, and all these votes were equivalent during the procedure of making the final decision. In other words, after analyzing all the habilitation documents and thorough discussion during the panel meeting, the decision was based on voting of seven members of the panel, and the results dependent solely on the number of voices “for” and “against”, without any “weights of votes”, i.e. the power of each vote was exactly the same. Moreover, written evaluations, presented by reviewers, and oral opinions presented by other members, had to be seriously considered, thus, any single vote could not easily change the opinion of the whole panel. This also indicates another serious oversight of Koza and others (Koza *et al.*, 2023). The voting system determined that each member of the habilitation panel had to carefully analyze all documents submitted by the candidate and evaluate his/her achieve-

ments, irrespective of the formal function played in the panel (president, secretary, reviewer or ordinary member – the only difference was that reviewers were obligated to write formal evaluation reports, whereas other members should present their opinions during the panel meeting).

Koza and others (Koza *et al.*, 2023) strongly criticized the fact that members of the Central Board were often presidents of habilitation panels. In their opinion “This level of concentration of power is made possible by the high degree of centralization in the Polish system of academic promotions, with just a handful of influential players (or, in extreme cases, just a single individual) being in control of academic promotions in a given discipline”. In the light of the procedure described in the preceding paragraph, such a statement does not make sense, as being one of seven (equal) members of the habilitation panel it is not possible to control the academic promotion. The authors wrote “We have shown that being selected to a panel of judges is positively related to membership in a central administrative body”. Yes, this is true, and it was also reflected by the statistical analyses performed by Koza and others (Koza *et al.*, 2023). However, this fact has never been questioned or hidden. In contrast, it was a common decision of the Central Board to select their members as presidents of most of the habilitation panels. However, this was not to “control the academic promotion” in the sense of arbitrary decisions who should be promoted and who not, but to help the panels to properly analyze achievements of the candidates in the light of the obligatory rules and required criteria which should be met. Actually, this is a very responsible job which requires from the president of the panel not only high competence in the specific research discipline but also knowledge about the necessary procedures and specific criteria in the process of awarding the habilitation degree. Therefore, the statement of Koza and others (Koza *et al.*, 2023) that the role of the president of the panel is “least absorbing yet most prestigious (and influential) (...), as opposed to that of referee” is totally untrue. In fact, the Research Excellence Council which replaced the Central Board, decided to refrain from nominating its members as presidents in most habilitation panels. However, this resulted in many mistakes in the procedures and serious problems arising from a lack of experience and required knowledge about procedures by some presidents of panels who were not involved in works of the Council or formerly of the Central Board. Simply, some such presidents of panels were high level experts in the specific fields, however, they were not familiar with obligatory criteria and formal rules. In fact, as researchers not formally involved in the administrative procedures of the academic promotions, they were not obliged to know details of such rules during their daily work, contrary to members of the Central Board or the Council. This can be another argument for the importance of the role of the president of the panel and can corroborate the validity of the previous decision of the Central Board.

It is not my role to judge what was the reason of such a false statement described by Koza and others (Koza *et al.*, 2023), misunderstanding of the procedure or a lack of appropriate knowledge on roles of all members of the habilitation panels. Nevertheless, such a level of ignorance gives rise to serious doubts about the quality of any conclusions about the academic promotion system by the authors who either do not know or do not understand the system. The claim about the ignorance of the authors in this point is supported by

their another statement: “The secretary was a crucial role, because, despite being a glorified paper-pusher, it was the secretary’s job to make sure the procedure ran smoothly and conformed with the relevant laws and regulations”. Again, this statement is completely invalid. It is true that the secretary’s role was extremely important, not only because he/she should – like all other members of the panel – analyze and evaluate the candidate’s achievements, but also because of his/her responsibility to prepare all documents, like the protocol from the panel’s meeting and the drafts of the final resolution and its justification. However, “to make sure the procedure ran smoothly and conformed with the relevant laws and regulations” was the job of the president of the panel, not the secretary. Thus, the suggestion of Koza and others (Koza *et al.*, 2023) that the members of the Central Board selected themselves as presidents of habilitation panels to occupy the position which was “least absorbing yet most prestigious (and influential)” is totally false, as actually the president’s role was one of the hardest and most absorbing among the members of the panel. This serious error of Koza and others (Koza *et al.*, 2023) can be corroborated by another statement of these authors: “The easiest jobs were those of the chair and ordinary members, who were just additional voting members of the panel”. As I mentioned above, all members of the panel, including the president (the chair) and ordinary members, were obligated to thoroughly analyze all the documents and especially the achievements of candidates, as their votes were as strong as votes of reviewers. Saying that they “were just additional voting members of the panel” shows such a high level of ignorance of the authors about the system they analyzed that in my opinion they should never attempt to analyze it.

Another ridiculous suggestion found in the text of the article by Koza and others (Koza *et al.*, 2023) is that selecting the members of the Central Board as presidents of habilitation panels “might be related to the financial remuneration received by all panel members”. It is true that all members of the panel received financial compensation for their work (a few hundred Euro per application). However, this was just a remuneration for the extra job which had to be done, and as indicated above, this was neither easy nor quick work. Each member of the panel was obliged to analyze all achievements of the candidate which normally takes at least several hours (or even a few days in the case of a more complex or disputable application), and then a few hours for the panel meeting. Suggesting that there was “money for nothing” or “easy money” is simply absurd.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Polish system of academic promotions is neither easy nor perfect. It is obvious that detailed analyses of the procedures are important and can indicate points that should be improved. However, such analyses must be professional and performed with care and deep understanding the problem if one should treat them seriously. In fact, the statistical analyses performed by Koza and others (Koza *et al.*, 2023) using data from academic promotion procedures between 2011 and 2020 in Poland were correctly performed and provided some interesting results. However, the conclusions presented by the authors were highly influenced by serious errors and misinterpretation of the data. The authors ignored significant aspects of these procedures, and presented statements and conclusions which were unsubstantiated and false, at best. Therefore, the academic promotion system should be deeply analyzed but with significantly more care and with consideration of actual rules as well as roles played by researchers involved in the procedures. Biochemistry was indicated by Koza and others (Koza *et al.*, 2023) as a discipline which was the most severely affected by inadequate composition of the habilitation panels, nevertheless similar accusation was indicated for many other disciplines. However, such an incrimination appears unsubstantiated as it apparently arose from errors in data analysis and ignorance of the authors in assessing the roles of habilitation panels and their various members.

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REFERENCE

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