

***Title***

**Where Soviet and neoliberal discourses meet: the transformation of the purposes of higher education in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia**

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***Domain:***

Higher Education Policy

Knowledge, research, innovations, technologies are increasingly being declared as key factors of social and economic development, drivers of innovative development and social modernization around the world, including Russia (Strategiya innovatsionnogo ... 2011, European Commission, 2010). However, scholarly literature lacks research on the question what is the nature of the links between higher education and societies.

This study is a part of a large-scale mixed-methods international research project “Change in Networks, Higher Education and Knowledge Societies» (CINHEKS)” (PI – Jussi Välimaa), which attempts to underpin what connects higher education and societies in different national contexts. One of the ways to connect higher education and society is to analyse the role and purposes of higher education.

This paper presents the results of political discourse analysis which had an objective to analyse the role of higher education in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia over last decades. The study focuses on the search and analysis of the categories defining purposes and tasks of higher education in a larger societal context (society, economy, etc), traces the changes in the discourse constructions over several decades. This research is a first attempt to conduct a discourse analysis of the role of higher education in Russia (to the knowledge of the author).

**Conceptual framework**

As Välimaa and Hoffman (2008) note there are several approaches in social sciences which try to underpin the links between higher education and society: B.Clark’s triangle, resource dependency theory, the role of knowledge in changing the university (Gibbons et al 1994), analysis of interaction of universities, governments and business (Etzkowitz et al 2000), the pressure of capitalist economy changing universities (Slaughter and Leslie 1997, Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). However, these accounts do not offer a fine framework for explanation of the link between higher education and social changes, especially when it comes to the regions

beyond those where those concepts were developed (Marginson and Considine 2000, Valimaa and Hoffman 2008).

In this paper we share a research approach according to which the discourse is constructed socially, although we do not consider that society and social relations are entirely constructed in the discourse (Jorgensen and Phillips 2008, [Titscher](#) et al 2009). We employ critical discourse analysis approach by Fairclough (1992), according to which discourse both reproduces and transforms knowledge, identities and social relations, but also is being formed by other social practices and structures. Moreover, policy texts as objects of discourse analysis are of significance as leading to a number of operationalisations which affect social reality (Saarinen 2008).

### **Modes of inquiry and data sources**

The political discourse analysis was carried out using the document base which involved over 30 titles released from 1956 to 2013: laws on education, law on higher education, federal programs of educational development, Presidents' decrees, governmental concepts and programs of the development of Russia, education, science and innovations, informatisation of higher education, information society, other decrees and programs.

### **Results and conclusions**

Over decades, the basic dichotomy in relation to the purposes and role of higher education unfolds between vocational training (which is a determining factor in the development of the economy, the knowledge economy or national economy) and personal development/education (which is the basic condition of social, public and spiritual development). These two poles can be described as economic instrumentalism and social instrumentalism.

Soviet discourse can be characterized as having both economic and social instrumentalism. However, the predominance of social instrumentalism should be recognized, because in the Soviet society, which had a specific normative framework for further development, an education served as a tool to create a new man, who was characterized not so much with the professional knowledge and skills, but with other personal qualities – spiritual and moral. Perhaps the formation, socialization mission of the higher education prevailed over educational and research ones.

Social instrumentalism persisted in the early 1990s. Moreover, higher education gained a kind of self-value when it was constructed on the basis on the individual needs of personal and professional growth. Values transmitted by education were seen as a key instrument of influence on social development and progress.

But gradually this discourse disappeared from policy documents. A new society of late 2000-2010s, an innovative socially oriented one, is rather not even society, but “a type of development”, based on the knowledge economy. The documents do not develop further the values of education and future society. New “type of development” is based on the policies and declarations taken from the "advanced", "developed" countries. Higher education is seen in economic terms, evaluated on the criteria of the contribution to economic growth and the extent of the compliance with the labour market. Thus, recent policy documents constitute mainly economic instrumental role of higher education.

This discourse complies with the neoliberal agenda of the reforms undertaken in Russia over last two decades. The pattern of neoliberal reforms includes reduction of state funding of higher education, shift costs to the “market” and consumers, stresses accountability and emphasizes higher education’s role in the economy (Neave and Van Vught 1991 cit.by Marginson and Rhoades 2002).

Despite that seemingly radical shift from the total governmental control to the (more) market control, there is a number of themes which maintain **continuity** from Soviet to Post-Soviet discourse. They are mostly related to the economic perspective on higher education: a need to match higher education and future employment, employability of graduates (in Soviet time it was called "better use of specialists"); an importance of not only practical, but also theoretical component of higher education; a need to intensify cooperation of higher education and production sector; intensification of basic and applied research at higher educational institutions.

Thus, economic instrumentalism becomes the meeting point of Soviet and neoliberal discourses and continues to limit the role, tasks and real functions of the social institution of higher education in a society.

### **Implications of the study**

The results of the study will contribute to the analysis of the transformation of the role and purposes of higher education in modern societies, conceptualisation of nature of the neoliberal reforms, the transformations of higher education in Post-Socialist countries.

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