

Anna Smolentseva

National Research University - Higher School of Economics, Russia

Recent socio-economic and political reforms, globalisation, technological innovations and changes in higher education policy have made the nature and purposes of higher education in Russia more complex. The mission of higher education has often been framed in national policy documents. However, the multifaceted nature of social processes, increasing participation in the higher education, differentiation of the system, as well as the limitations of political statements, ensure that the purposes of higher education go far beyond those declared in governmental guidelines.

Drawing on the results of the policy discourse analysis and case-studies of two Russian universities, the paper addresses the transformations and tensions in the purposes of higher education as they are stated in policy documents and perceived by university administrators and faculty. The main dichotomy in approaching the purposes of higher education unfolds between economic and social instrumentalism: whether higher education is considered mostly as an instrument of economic development (vocational training) or personal development. The paper illuminates congruence and discrepancies between political documents and institutional practices as well as emerging tensions at the institutional level.

### **Conceptual framework**

This study is a part of a large-scale mixed-method international project “Change in Networks, Higher Education and Knowledge Societies» (CINHEKS<sup>1</sup>)” (PI – Jussi Välimaa), which attempts to unwrap what connects higher education and societies in different national contexts. We depart from several concepts developed in higher education studies, 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

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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). For the Russian case we are connecting higher education and society through the analysis of the role and purposes of higher education.

The study employs 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. Policy texts as objects of discourse analysis are of significance as leading to a number of operationalisations which affect social reality (Saarinen 2008). The case-study methodology followed grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 2001).

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

The paper synthesizes the results of political discourse and interview data analyses. For this paper we use the results of the discourse analysis reported at the previous SRHE conference (Smolentseva 2014) which focuses on the search and analysis of the categories defining purposes of higher education in a larger societal context in political documents from 1956 to 2013.

The case study involved interviews in two Russian HEIs selected to represent different regions (capital vs mid-level region in terms of income, development of HE and R&D) and type of institutions (top nationally/globally oriented vs mid-range regionally oriented; polytechnic vs comprehensive university). There were 47 interviews with top and middle level administrators, faculty members, and researchers in selected departments.

### **Results and conclusions**

In the Soviet documents, higher education was considered both as an instrument of national socio-economic development and individual growth. The latter role was predominant as education was an essential part of the broader social project of constructing a “new Soviet man”. In the transition period of mid-1980s – mid-1990s the policy discourse reflects an attempt to depart from economic instrumentalism and focus on the humanistic and social nature of education. Later documents present the transition to the economic instrumentalism emphasizing the economic role and economic rationales in higher education policy, which reflects the nature of the recent neoliberal reforms in the country.

Recent neoliberal policy finds a good foundation in the Soviet legacy (Smolentseva 2014). Economic instrumentalism prevails in both recent documents and academic community discourse: the mission of higher education is predominantly defined as training the cadre for the

national economy. Current governmental economic discourse is easily recognized in the interviews via continuous references to the labor market and employers who are viewed as the ultimate customers and evaluators of HEIs. This can also be traced in institutional policies aimed at optimization of cost and benefits exclusively in economic terms.

Along with the conformity between institutional and governmental approaches to the purposes of HE, the interviews reveal some tensions between economic and social instrumentalism. The discrepancy between national needs perspective prevailing in the documents and individual needs perspective found at HEIs (what a graduate should learn, be able to do etc.) in practice enables HEIs to go beyond the aim of provision with professional qualifications to be used at the labor market and address the social mission of higher education (personal development, general socialization, generic skills, cultural literacy, etc.). Predominance of economic discourse leads to the distortion of the educational mission of higher education. Larger social trends – demographic decline (meaning lack of well-prepared students, decrease of fee-paying students), decline of many industries (no traditional employers to work for) and others - also contribute to the increasing importance of the social mission of HE. Social mission often contradicts the economic utilitarianism interiorized by administrators and faculty since the Soviet time, and in the environment impoverished by economic rationales, the importance of the social purposes of higher education has been rising.

## **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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