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Academic Excellence as 'Competitiveness Enhancement' in Russian Higher Education

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Academic Excellence as ‘Competitiveness Enhancement’ in Russian Higher Education

The Special Issue on International Perspectives on 'Teaching Excellence in Higher Education'

Abstract

Purpose – This study sets out to analyse critically the Russian Academic Excellence Initiative (the Project 5-100), designed to propel five leading Russian universities into world university rankings (WURs) by 2020, and research it through the lens of neoliberalism. The paper intends to reveal recurrent discourses and dominant orders of discourse constituting the overall concept of ‘excellence’ in Russian higher education (HE) policy.

Methodology – Since the Project 5-100 has been designed in line with a neoliberal model of academic excellence initiatives, emphasising ‘competition as a driver of excellence’ (Hazelkorn, 2009), Fairclough’s approach to critical discourse analysis (CDA) has been adopted as a qualitative research method. There is no universally accepted definition of ‘excellence’ in HE policy; therefore, this CDA also aims at revealing the Russian government’s vision of the concept and its voice in HE policy.

Findings – The paper concludes that the government reinforces neoliberal discourse on the HE agenda and transforms 5-100 Universities’ identities through emphasising the role of WURs in modernising the HE system. Consequently, within the neoliberal paradigm, the Project 5-100 can be regarded as a manifestation of the commodification of ‘excellence’ in Russian HE policy.

Originality/value – This research intends to broaden knowledge of Excellence Initiatives in HE policy and reveal their features and neoliberal natures. It also seeks to contribute in terms of showcasing a qualitative study of the Project 5-100 for future comparative analyses of similar HE policies.

Keywords: Excellence, Russian Higher Education Policy, Rankings, CDA, Neoliberalism

Article Classification: Research paper

Introduction

In many countries around the globe, the university as a crucial part of tertiary education has become a key instrument for boosting social and economic growth and developing a knowledge-based society to compete effectively in global knowledge economies (Altbach, 2013; Mohrman *et al.*, 2008; Salmi, 2003). The production of scientific knowledge, research, and innovation has transformed into a driver or alternative engine of economic growth alongside the traditional sources of wealth, including land, labor, and capital (Etzkowitz, 2003; Salmi, 2003). Furthermore, the university acts as a crucial pillar of human capital development since it provides not only highly-skilled workforce for labor market, but also it trains postgraduate students and equips young researchers and scientists with knowledge and skills essential for producing and fostering research and innovations (Salmi, 2003).

In the global knowledge-based economy, world university rankings (WURs) have triggered numerous education policies and initiatives worldwide to develop high-ranking research universities within national systems as engines of socio-economic growth and as a symbol of achievements and prestige of countries' higher education (HE) systems (Marginson and Van der Wende, 2007). It can be explained by the fact that WURs appear to gauge world-class status and prestige, provide university accountability, and measure national competitiveness (Hazelkorn, 2009).

Both developed and developing countries have designed and implemented HE policies aimed to attain world-class quality and status and enhance 'excellence' of their leading universities. Rostan *et al.* (2011, p.viii) explains that "excellence as a policy issue reflects the institutional and competitive pressures exerted by the global rankings movement on national systems and institutions". Although historically this type of initiatives has been the purview of developed and ex-imperial countries, for developing countries such policies appear to be important in terms of joining the global race for top positions in WURs and retaining/attracting talent, as well as gaining their political weight worldwide and expanding their presence in the international HE market.

This article sets out to analyse critically the Project 5-100 aiming at establishing a small group of leading Russian universities which have been subsidised by the Russian government to bolster their global competitive advantages and consequently enter the top 100 WURs by 2020.

'Excellence' and world university rankings in higher education policies

HE has turned to be "the focus of intense policy and geo-political interest" (Hazelkorn, 2009, p.1) since its significance for economic development and innovation growth has been increasingly well-recognised. HE has also become crucial to international competitiveness, and its global quality and status have turned to be vital performance indicators of a nation's HE system (Hazelkorn, 2009). Therefore, governments' interests in the global status and performance of their national HE systems have reinforced the importance of WURs in terms of being "a proxy for competitiveness" (Hazelkorn, 2014). Despite their contested nature and numerous methodological flaws (Hazelkorn, 2009; Rostan *et al.*, 2011; Marginson and Van der Wende, 2007; Blanco-Ramírez and Berger, 2014), WURs have transformed into "a policy instrument" (Hazelkorn, 2014) and had a significant impact on HE policies worldwide:

The instantaneous global response to the publication of the first global rankings and its imitators has had a significant impact and influence on higher education – accelerating the modernization agenda, providing some public accountability and transparency, emphasizing institutional performance to improve quality, and promoting a global 'reputation race' system (Hazelkorn, 2009, p.8).

Consequently, WURs have become "the de facto gauge of excellence" (Hazelkorn, 2014) or "the main carriers of

excellence” (Rostan and Vaira, 2011) in global HE.

Nevertheless, ‘excellence’ is an ambiguous and vague concept in HE, and it is often implemented with no clear explanation of its meaning. What is more, it has a number of understandings which can be privileged or marginalised by different stakeholders in certain contexts. For example, Little and Locke (2011) explain that ‘excellence’ can be interpreted as a positional good for students, as an aspirational goal for educational leaders or policymakers to improve quality, as a form of reputational advantage for HEIs or as a means of achieving governmental economic and social goals. This contested concept is “historically and situationally contingent, [since] the definitions of excellence are located within shifting social, economic and political contexts and are underpinned by broader discourses or ideologies of higher education” (Brusoni *et al.*, 2014, p.23). Moreover, its meanings tend to change according to the global competitive environment which nowadays is dominated by “the *new managerialist* practices, as the state seeks to increase the economic return from higher education; [by] the general shift from elite to mass higher education systems; and [by] the *rankings*” (Brusoni *et al.*, 2014, p.23). Thus, ‘excellence’ is defined by proxy indicators rather than by intrinsic characteristics.

Rostan and Vaira (2011) and Brusoni *et al.* (2014) suggest that WURs are considered as one of the main carriers of excellence reflecting various governments’ power and their political interests (e.g. in terms of driving up countries’ international prestige and maximising the visibility of their HE systems worldwide) and as tools to adopt a traditional view on excellence which mainly favours the research activity rather than the teaching and learning one. Marginson and Van der Wende (2007) argue that some global ranking companies (such as Shanghai Ranking Consultancy and QS Quacquarelli Symonds) tend to focus deliberately more on research performance and less on teaching and learning activities, which may be provoked by difficulties inherent in assessing and comparing ‘teaching excellence’ on a worldwide basis and generating data based on the measures of ‘value added’ during the educational process. Whilst other ranking companies such as the Times Higher Education magazine tend to reward more higher education institutions’ (HEIs) internationalisation and presence in global education markets and favour less research (Marginson and Van der Wende, 2007). Therefore, the emphasis on research and its dominant position in defining ‘excellence’ can be attributed to the fact that “the hegemonic rhetoric of knowledge society and economy stresses the role of scientific and technological research as the main lever for innovation-based competitiveness” (Rostan *et al.*, 2011, p.xvi).

Furthermore, global comparisons and competition are possible only in relation to one certain type of HEIs the world-class research university, which due to its features has become dominant in WURs (Marginson and Van der Wende, 2007). There is no universally accepted definition of world-class universities (WCUs), but what is known is that they represent a small proportion of global HE, have diversified sources of income, concentrate top talents from overseas, generate ground-breaking research output, and enforce governance policies favouring high quality research and teaching (Salmi, 2009; Mohrman *et al.*, 2008).

However, Brusoni *et al.* (2014) explains that ‘excellence’ has no meaning if every university is excellent and therefore this discourse offers no way of distinguishing the performance of individual institutions. This also implies that the concept of ‘excellence’ is necessarily exclusive, carrying connotations of distinction in the Bourdieusian sense.

Policies for 'excellence' in Russian higher education

Many countries worldwide, including China, Singapore, Canada, the USA, South Korea, Russia have already implemented excellence initiatives (Salmi, 2009) to boost research productivity and enhance overall competitiveness of their national HE systems globally, as indicated in WURs. According to Froumin and Lisytukin (2015), the expression '*excellence initiative*' has been borrowed from the German HE policy texts which define it as an initiative aimed at promoting world-class research and improving the quality of universities and research HEIs overall transforming Germany in a widely recognised research location and making it more globally competitive.

One of the major features of various policies for excellence is that they seek to drive differentiation and segmentation of a national HE system along the model of the WCU, by selecting a group of elite universities to concentrate resources into more efficient, productive, visible HEIs (Hazelkorn, 2009). This helps to raise the international reputation and prestige of a country's research HEIs, as well as the sector overall, and attracts international and domestic researchers, students, and additional funds (OECD, 2014).

In terms of the Russian Federation, there have already been adopted three Excellence Initiatives, including 'Federal University Programme (2005)', 'Innovative University Programme (2006)', 'National Research University Programme (2009)', with the core mission to boost and strengthen world-class research productivity of Russian universities.

In May 2013, the Russian Academic Excellence Project was launched in accordance with the Presidential Decree of the Russian Federation № 599 *On measures to realize state policy in the sphere of education and science*, the Project 5-100 "wants to tap into the full academic and research potential of Russian Universities while bolstering their positions in the global education market" (RAEI, 2018). This constitutes a significant historical shift in understanding of the purpose of HEIs, as Russian HEIs used to specialise in teaching exclusively, since the leading role in publications-centered research previously belonged to the Russian Academy of Sciences (Froumin and Lisytukin, 2015). The name of the Project 5-100 reflects the expected outcome of this initiative – to propel at least five of Russia's universities into the top 100 WURs by 2020. On a competitive basis, 21 Russian universities have been selected to receive additional state subsidies to "maximise [their] competitive position [...] in the global research and education market" (RAEI, 2018), as well as improve their positioning in the top 100 WURs and Rankings by Subjects, including the Times Higher Education World University Ranking, QS World University Rankings, and Academic Rankings of World Universities. Thus, the crucial difference between the Project 5-100 and the other three Excellence Initiatives is that it implements WURs as a policy instrument to drive changes in Russian HE and transform a small number of Russian universities into WCUs.

Interestingly, Hazelkorn (2009) singles out two major models of Excellence-driven policies and initiatives, such as the neoliberal and social-democratic models. The neoliberal model intends to produce reputational (vertical) differentiation by introducing "rankings as a free market mechanism to drive the concentration of *excellence* in a small number of research-intensive universities" for competing globally (Hazelkorn, 2009, p.7). A number of Excellence Initiatives based on this neoliberal model have been implemented in China, France, Germany, and Korea with the aim to create a small number of WCUs focusing on research performance (Hazelkorn, 2009; Salmi, 2009). Within this model, competition or competitiveness enhancement serves as a driver for excellence which highlights its neoliberal nature.

In contrast, the social-democratic model aims at establishing a system of horizontally differentiated student experiences and HEIs with high performance and globally oriented missions (Hazelkorn, 2009). Rather than funding

and transforming a small group of elite institutions into WCUs, the governments (including Australia, Ireland, and Norway) strive for fostering “excellence wherever it occurs” by supporting high quality HEIs throughout the country (Hazelkorn, 2009).

Methodology

To examine the Project 5-100 through the prism of neoliberalism and identify the Russian government’s voice in shaping ‘excellence’ in Russian HE policy, Fairclough’s approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been adopted as a form of a text-oriented analysis. This approach is significant for this research as it seeks “to develop ways of analyzing language which address its involvement in the workings of contemporary capitalist societies” (Fairclough, 2013, p.1) since capitalism, or its widely recognised ‘neoliberal’ version, has triggered and entailed a number of serious changes in politics and economies, in education and healthcare, in the working environment and lifestyle.

The study applies Fairclough’s three-dimensional model (1993; 2013) which draws on an analytical framework aimed at combining three different stages of analysis, including text analysis for describing spoken or written language texts, processing analysis for producing and interpreting texts, and social analysis for explaining discourses embedded in socio-historical contexts. It also adopts Fairclough’s (2013) understanding of *discourse* which is regarded as “a complex set of relations”, including the relations of communication (between people who speak, write, and communicate with each other in other ways), the relations between certain communicative events (newspaper article, policy documents, etc.), and the relations of complex discursive ‘objects’ (language, discourses, and genres). Furthermore, *discourse* can be understood as “a way of signifying experience from a particular perspective” (Fairclough, 1993, p.138), in other words, it is seen as some representations of social practices from a specific perspective.

As the object of CDA, the ‘emergence and constitution of the discourses’ (Fairclough, 2012) of ‘excellence’ in Russian HE has been chosen in this research. To identify the discourses of ‘excellence’ within the field of prior discourses and specify the relations between various discourses drawn together to constitute various orders of discourse, a genealogical approach has been implemented (Fairclough, 2012). According to Fairclough (2003, p.206), discourses can be revealed and networked in a “relatively durable social structuring of language”, *order of discourse*, which is “a particular social ordering of relationships amongst different ways of making meaning, i.e. different discourses and genres and styles”. For instance, it can be the marketisation order or managerial order of discourse which have spread around public organisations and institutions, including universities.

The text dataset for this CDA is based on different resources of various genres, including governmental policy documents, official texts from the governmental website pages both in English and Russian, news articles published on the website, the transcripts of the videos released on the official website and YouTube. In total, forty-two resources were identified through searching the Internet, later imported, and analysed with the help of NVivo (a qualitative data analysis software). In the process of rereading thoroughly and tracking recurrent ideas and dominant discourses, 21 key texts (see Table 1) were identified and coded following inductively oriented approach (Wodak and Meyer, 2009). The texts coded earlier were recoded and used to design a table with dominant discourses based on recurrent codes and numerous citations from documents for eliminating minor codes and developing an analytical framework.

The key texts have been selected based on the following inclusion criteria:

- published by the Russian governmental bodies or released on the official 5-100 website;
- mentioned and referred in the main 5-100 policy documents;
- and publicly available on the Internet.

Table 1. The key texts of CDA to examine the Project 5-100 and their in-text citations.

Government policy documents	
Government 1662 (2008)	<i>Concept of long-term social and economic development of Russian Federation until 2020</i>
President Decree 203 (2017)	<i>The Concept of Development of Information Society in the Russian Federation 2017-2030</i>
President Decree 599 (2012)	<i>On Measures to Implement the State Policy in Education and Science</i>
Government 960 (2016)	<i>The Directive of the Government of the Russian Federation No 960-r</i>
Government 211 (2013)	<i>On Measures to Support Russian Leading Universities in Enhancing their Competitiveness among Global Research and Education Centres</i>
Government 281 (2017)	<i>The Directive of the Government of the Russian Federation No. 281-R</i>
Government 2006 (2012)	<i>The Directive of the Government of the Russian Federation No 2006-r</i>
Government 301 (2014)	<i>The Development of Science and Technology 2013-2014</i>
Ministry of Education (2006)	<i>The Development Strategy of Science and Innovation in the Russian Federation until 2015</i>
Ministry of Education (2001)	<i>The Concept of Modernisation of Russian Education until 2010</i>
Government 792 (2013)	<i>On the State Programme of Education Development 2013-2020</i>
Policy texts on the official website	
RAEI (Russian Academic Excellence Initiative), <i>Russian Academic Excellence Project 5-100</i> (available at: http://5top100.com/)	
Russian Project 5-100, <i>Russian Academic Excellence Project 5-100</i> (available at: http://5top100.ru/)	
Journals and news articles on the official website	
Times Higher Education (2014)	<i>First XV: How the Project 5-100 stars are transforming the Russian academy</i>
Russian Academic Excellence Project (2016)	<i>Managing academic excellence initiatives: a real intellectual challenge</i>
HERB (Higher Education in Russia and Beyond) (2015)	<i>It is All about Rankings</i>
News 5-100 (2015)	<i>The Number of Russian Universities in the Rankings Increases Almost Sevenfold.</i>
THE (Times Higher Education) (2015)	<i>2020 Vision: a Focus on Research and Internationalization for Russia's Project 5-100</i>
Video transcripts	
Official Video (2015) <i>The Project 5-100</i>	
Video 1 (2013) <i>The Project 5-100-2020: Session I of Strategic Planning</i>	
Video 2 (2014) <i>The Project 5-100-2020: Session II of Strategic Planning</i>	

This framework has been designed only for analysing the policy from a government's perspective, thus it might be difficult to apply it to examine a policy, for instance, from academics' or students' viewpoints. Moreover, due to the nature of CDA, the analysis has adopted mainly a critical stance, and it does not aim to conduct a policy evaluation of the Project 5-100.

The historic background and rationales behind the policy for 'excellence' in Russia

The policy texts position the initiative for 'excellence' in a particular historical context. Due to the collapse of the Soviet Union and following economic crises, the texts suggest the country "has fallen out from the global historical context for 20 years" and consequently has been "lagging behind" the developed economies (Video 1, 2017). Like many other countries exporting natural resources, Russia has strived to tackle its 'backwardness' and foster its transition from the resource-based economy to the knowledge-based economy. That "will allow to expand drastically the competitive potential of Russian economy through enhancing its comparative advantages in science, education,

and high technologies, and on this basis, it will allow to implement new resources for economic growth and well-being improvement” (Government 1662, 2008, p.7). These claims evoke key neoliberal tenets associated with globalisation.

Moreover, the strategic document *Russian Government 1662* (2008) explains that the new economic model will be drawn on Russia’s ‘competitive advantages’ in the form of traditional sectors (energy industry, transport and agriculture sectors) alongside science-intensive industries implying the breakthrough of ‘human capital advancement’, the development of cutting edge high-tech production, and the transformation of innovation output into a key revenue for the country’s ‘economic growth’.

A critical condition for the development of innovation economy [as a type of knowledge-based economy] appears to be modernisation of the [Russian] education system which is a foundation of dynamic economic growth and societal development and a key factor of people’s well-being and the country’s security (Government 1662, 2008, p.22).

In the example above, the discourses of ‘modernisation’ of the Russian HE system is formulated and constructed on the discourse of ‘knowledge-based society’. For instance, ‘modernisation’ can be identified as one of the solutions to overcome numerous hurdles posed by Russia’s underperforming economy. Notably, the overall discourse of ‘Russian education’ is shaped and constructed through numerous economic terms which may be explained by “colonization” (Fairclough, 1993) of ‘education discourse’ by ‘knowledge-based economy’ (the latter turns out to be a dominant order of discourse).

Interestingly, Fairclough (2002) describes the New Capitalism (or neoliberalism) as ‘knowledge-’ or ‘information-based’, since it appears to be dependent on ‘knowledge’, ‘new technologies’, and ‘innovation’. In fact, the restructuring of capitalism (and its latest form of neoliberalism) is knowledge-driven and discourse-led. Neoliberal discourse is not limited to the economic field, “it also embraces the ramifications of economic transformation in other fields including culture, education, national politics, international relations and international security” (Fairclough, 2002, p.164).

The role of the 5-100 Universities in the modernisation process can be regarded as building up ‘competitive advantages’ in order to catch up with highly performing countries in the international research and education services markets. The discourse of ‘modernisation’ can also be identified in the intended outcomes of the initiative, in other words the implementation of the Project 5-100 “sent a new satellite into orbit to *assist in the process of revamping Russian higher education* and make and giving it a contemporary” (RAEI, 2018).

Since the year 2000 one of the key directions of the structural change in the professional education system has been the selection of a cluster of leading universities for accelerating the development of higher education system (the drivers of modernisation). Lomonosov’s Moscow State University, Saint Petersburg State University^[1], federal and national research universities have designed and implemented development programmes approved by the government (Government 792, 2013, p.22).

Thus, one of the targets of ‘modernisation’ in Russian HE is to drive vertical differentiation and segmentation of HEIs to select ‘a cluster’ of high-performing Russian universities with a special mission to be the “drivers of modernisation” and “agents of innovation”.

From the government’s perspective, “the formation of a cluster of leading universities fostering modernisation of the [Russian] HE system as a whole” (Government 792, 2013, p.31) will accelerate growth and sustain the country’s

economy capacity and competitiveness. It shows that instead of modernising and reforming all Russian universities as a whole, the government concentrates large resources to “design real Russian cases recognised by the world academic community of successful examples of effective university development” (Government 792, 2013, p.105).

By its nature, the discourse of ‘excellence’ in HE implies some hierarchies required to single out and label ‘outstanding quality’ and a ‘special status’ which should be recognised and awarded accordingly. Consequently, ‘competition’ and ‘competitiveness’ appear to be essential for promoting ‘excellence’, since these two concepts imply the production of hierarchies in HE (Hazelkorn, 2009).

Critical Discourse Analysis of ‘excellence’ discourse

The word ‘excellence’ is frequently observed in the names of similar educational initiatives (e.g. the German Excellence Initiative ‘Die *Exzellenzinitiative*’, The French Excellence Initiative ‘Initiatives *d’excellence*’, the Spanish International campus of Excellence ‘Campus de *Excelencia* Internacional’). Nevertheless, the name of the Project ‘the Russian Academic Excellence Initiative Project 5-100’ has been rendered differently in Russian – ‘Competitiveness Enhancement of Leading Russian Universities among Global Research and Education Centers’^[2]. Therefore, the name reveals that ‘excellence’ in Russian HE policy is interpreted and recontextualised as ‘competitiveness’ which links back to the neoliberal model and the nature of this initiative emphasising “competition as a driver of excellence” (Hazelkorn, 2009).

A linguistic reason behind it might be straightforward: there is not any widely accepted expression which will be a word by word translation of ‘Academic Excellence’ in Russian. However, due to the rise and popularity of initiatives for excellence worldwide, it has become possible to track the emergence of a new term in Russian ‘*akademicheskoye prevoskhodstvo*’ (which is a loan translation of ‘academic excellence’) in Russian HE policy, in particular in mass media articles and governmental website documents, but not in official policy documentation yet.

In the analysed dataset, the concept ‘excellence’ has been tightly related to the concept of ‘competitiveness’ (*‘konkurentosposobnost’*) and has acquired a new meaning which emphasises the need to build up and enhance Russia’s ‘capacity’ and ‘international competitiveness’ in order “to maximize the competitive position of a group of leading Russian universities in the global research and education market” (RAEI, 2018). Blackmore (2016) explains that academic excellence is inherently competitive, and consequently ‘competitiveness’ appears to be encouraged deliberately through government policy, changes in communication technologies and the globalisation of HE. Thus, it is crucial to examine the relations between ‘excellence’ and ‘competitiveness’ as a key starting point of the analysis.

Competitiveness in the national education market

In the era of neoliberal globalisation, the Russian government like many others worldwide tends to reduce its funding to public sectors (including HE) which encourages numerous Russian HEIs to compete for scarce state funds and generate their own revenue (Altbach *et al.*, 2009).

The Project 5-100 provides an example of the Russian government’s attempt to strengthen state control in HE through “the implementation of mechanisms aimed at ensuring transparent funding and promoting competition among higher professional education institutions” (Government 792, 2013, p.102). Speaking about various Excellence Initiatives, Isaac Froumin points out that “university development becomes increasingly driven by the state, whereas previously universities challenged governments and were their own engines for development. What we see now is that governments challenge universities to evolve in a particular direction. Academic excellence initiatives are paving the

way to a model where state control is higher” (RAEI, 2018).

Consequently, through implementing different education policies based on providing state subsidies, the Russian government intends to stimulate the national education market by encouraging competition among Russian universities. This provision of subsidies also serves as a tool to rationalise the government’s more active role in reshaping, modernising, transforming the 5-100 Universities which as a result appear to lose their autonomy through the agreements signed to receive the state funding.

To join the global race for ‘excellence’, the 5-100 Universities have to compete for the government’s funding which brings not only some additional resources, but also entails a significant change in the university management, in particular the imposition of the New Public Management (NPM) and the introduction of highly managerial discourse onto the agenda of the 5-100 Universities Government 792, 2013; RAEI, 2018; Video 1, 2017). The Project 5-100 seeks to develop and promote an effective model of university management aimed at the achievement of competitiveness and implementation of Russia’s socio-economic development programmes:

The main directions of university management development are accountability for results, professionalism and autonomy in term of identifying a strategic development goal, ability to find creative approaches to university activities (Government 792, 2013, p.92).

For example, one of the ways to impose NPM on the 5-100 Universities is to stress the importance of enhancing ‘competitiveness’, increasing ‘efficiency’ of the state subsidies, improving the ‘performance’ of the Universities, and consequently, tightening ‘financial control’ and improving ‘quality assurance’ of the Project. As a result, the Council on Competitiveness Enhancement of Leading Russian Universities among Global Research and Education Centres (the Council) “has been designed to enjoy long-term service as a permanent interdepartmental advisory body” and act as “the main governance body of the Project 5-100” (RAEI, 2018).

One of the key policy documents (Government 211, 2013) articulates and prescribes in detail a new type of relation between the 5-100 Universities and the Council, including all the set of responsibilities and duties. For instance, the latter has to assist in the selection of the 5-100 Universities (on a competitive basis), review and evaluate the Universities’ reports for recommending the Ministry of Education and Science whether to provide certain 5-100 Universities with state subsidies or not. The Council is also responsible for advising the Universities on WURs to choose to match ‘performance indicators’ of action plans or road maps (the strategic plans to rebrand the Universities to move them into the top 100 WURs). The Universities’ road maps tend to be formulated and based “on the metrics of the world university rankings (including Subject Rankings) recommended by the Council” (Government 211, 2013, p.5).

The textual analysis reveals that the Council plays a significant role in the Excellence Initiative in terms of introducing numerous discourses of the audit culture. The Council is represented as an external quality assurance body responsible for ‘evaluating’, ‘monitoring’, and ‘measuring’ the ‘performance’ of the 5-100 Universities. What is more, this audit culture is legitimised and rationalised in the texts through the need to boost global competitiveness, control the state funding, improve quality, and eventually propel the Universities into the top 100 WURs.

Another means to develop ‘an efficient management structure’ in the 5-100 Universities is “to implement measures to establish a succession pool for senior university management and attract specialists with experience in international and Russian Universities and research organisations to leadership positions” (Government 211, 2013, p.4). To provide internal quality assurance and make the management more ‘transparent’ and ‘publicly accountable’

within the 5-100 Universities, Boards of Trustees have been formed on the basis of ‘employers’ and other ‘stakeholders’, which appears to be “an important criterion to improve quality and relevance of academic and research activities” (Government 792, 2013, p.92). As a result, a new class of education managers emerges who are not necessarily academics or researchers but trained to make the 5-100 Universities more efficient, higher performing in WURs, and more globally recognised.

Therefore, NPM rhetoric can be represented through the various discourses blended and hybridised to embed and reinforce the ‘performativity culture’ in the 5-100 Universities, such as ‘efficient management’, ‘road maps’, ‘performance indicators’, ‘metrics of rankings’, and ‘positions in WURs’.

The strategic development plans comprise numerous performance indicators which are formulated and drawn on various metrics of WURs. Thus, the size of the state subsidies is calculated through a formula measuring the performance of 5-100 Universities against the indicators and their positions in WURs and the best scorers receive higher subsidies than the rest of the participants (Government 211, 2013).

Moreover, within this ‘performance-based funding’ structure or culture, subsidies can also be terminated to underperforming 5-100 Universities which “fail to demonstrate improved performance and planned growth in the world ranking within a two-year period” (Government 792, 201, p.104). It exemplifies how the discourses of ‘competition’ and ‘ranking’ intertwine with the managerial order of discourse. It also reveals one of the main features of this kind of initiatives which tend to award ‘excellence’ and fund accordingly those HEIs which are already advantaged in the ranking game (Rostan and Vaira, 2011; Brusoni *et al.*, 2014). Rostan and Vaira (2011) argue that Excellence Initiatives are likely to produce formal and informal hierarchies in national education systems through disregarding the HE system as a whole and targeting only individual HEIs which are already regarded as ‘elite institutions’ and which appear to be strong enough to compete globally. Inevitably, policies for excellence lead to a Matthew’s logic, that is to say, the strong get stronger and the weak get weaker (Rostan and Vaira, 2011).

Competitiveness in the global education market

In the late 2000s, the global financial and economic crisis urged the Russian government to reconsider its economic model, due to its being highly dependent on natural resources, and to turn its attention to a more sustainable ‘knowledge- and innovation-driven economy’ (Government 1662, 2008). The world crisis exacerbated ‘global competition’ between developed countries highly affected by the economic and financial crisis and developing countries, including China and India (which appear to be transforming into major locomotives of the world’s economic growth) and new emerging centres of economic development in Asia and Latin America (Government 1662, 2008).

The world crisis and the following growing ‘global competition’ have posed another challenge to Russia - the need to accelerate the economic growth and enhance its competitiveness to increase its economic and political weight in the world and secure its leading position in the region (Government 1662, 2008). This accelerated ‘economic competition’ has been accompanied by increasing ‘geopolitical competition’ for the control over ‘resources’ and ‘markets’. Indeed, the government highlights that the transformation of the world economic order opens up new opportunities for Russia’s global economic integration, strengthening and expanding its positions in the global markets to import new technologies and capital, as well as to export innovative products and educational services (Government 1662, 2008).

At the same time, the underdevelopment of new cutting-edge technologies can reduce the competitiveness of the Russian economy and increase its vulnerability in the growing geopolitical competition (Government 1662, 2008, p.4).

The discourse of 'global competition' is constructed not only based on the competition among economies, but also among education systems worldwide. The policy documents reinforce a certain discourse stressing that only innovative products and services will allow to compete effectively in the global markets, while "getting access to international markets is always like an acquisition of others' territory" (Government 1662, 2008; Video 1, 2017).

Moreover, there is a strong relation between 'competitiveness' and various discourses of 'education quality' in the dataset: for example, one of the documents reveals that "the competitiveness enhancement of Russian education will be a criterion of its high quality, as well as will secure Russia's positions as one of the leaders in exporting educational services" (Government 1662, 2008, p.45) in the global market. Thus, the concepts of 'competition', 'competitiveness', and 'quality' are intermingled and interconnected within the neoliberal order of discourse which implies that "increased competition represents improved quality within neoliberalism" (Olssen and Peters, 2005, p.326).

The 'global identity' of the Universities is essential for increasing 'export of educational services' which can be achieved by updating educational programmes and bringing them in line with the best international examples, by the production improvement of postgraduate activities, and by the implementation of joint educational programmes with leading international/Russian Universities and research organisations (Government 211, 2013; RAEI, 2018). Consequently, the 5-100 Universities attempt to integrate into the global education services market and increase their export of educational services:

There is a continuing decline in the global competitiveness of Russian universities, as well as decrease in Russia's role as an exporter of education services. The decision to join the Bologna Process has become a breakthrough amid the isolation of the Russian higher education from the global talent market, knowledge, and technology (Government 792, 2013, p.72).

This citation exemplifies the recurrent discourses of 'marketisation' in Russian HE that emphasise the role of the Universities as the producers of 'education services' that the country can provide and export to the global education market. The discourses of 'commodification of teaching' and 'commercialisation of education programmes' also emerge in the analysed texts which are shaped and reinforced by repeated discourses of 'export', 'exporter of education services', and 'internationalised curriculum'.

There is a particular stress on improving a postgraduate level at the 5-100 Universities and attracting top overseas students through joint Master's and PhD programmes with leading international universities, since the concentration of 'postgraduate students' or 'talent' enhances world-class research and fosters innovation productivity.

On the other hand, it reflects a problem remaining in Russian HE, such as "low innovative activity of [Russian] universities and inadequate contribution of higher education to the development of the national economy in line with the innovation scenario" of knowledge-based economy (Government 792, 2013, p.72). Consequently, by expanding its share in the global education services market, Russia seeks to transform the country into "the world's leading study destination" (RAEI, 2018) and boost its world competitiveness in the global education market.

Competitiveness in the 'research' or 'innovation' market

Numerous initiatives for excellence tend to be constantly pressed for time and funding, and consequently they

transform into an “intellectual challenge” set by a government or a president to the university administrations and academic staff to achieve “a big impact quickly”. Speaking about the thirteen 5-100 Universities which appeared in the THE ranking in 2015, Alexander Povalko (Former Deputy Minister of Education and Science) mentions:

This is probably the quickest progress among all the countries whose universities are ranked. [...] These most incredible results (which reveal the speed of their growth) have been demonstrated by the following universities: St. Petersburg Polytechnic, TPU and KFU [...] We [people related to the Project 5-100] realize that this result has been achieved thanks to things which can be done quickly. But the universities systemically invest into the development of their research bases, consistently strive to attract people, and, as a result, this initial rise in the rankings is the product of tireless efforts of the administration, scientists and students of the university (News 5-100, 2015).

The textual analysis identifies that there is an emphasis on the performativity and efficiency in numerous texts of the dataset, in other words, this constant push from the government to achieve ‘the quickest progress’ and ‘incredible results’ ‘quickly’. Furthermore, there is a clear stress on improving and developing mainly STEM programmes in Russian universities, boosting basic and applied research, and strengthening science to modernise the HE system in Russia.

Thus, through fostering research activity and favouring a WCU model, the government seeks to modernise Russian HE and promote a vertically differentiated system, in other words, produce a hierarchy with Russian research-intensive universities at the pinnacle:

Another priority [of the State Education Policy till 2020] is a quality, quantity and territory optimisation of universities which will lead to the formation of clusters of universities targeting specified goals and missions, and achieving high quality of education. Among them, there is expected to be a group of world-class research universities which provide leadership in basic and applied research and integrate Russia into the system of knowledge and technology commercialisation (Government 792, 2013, p.76).

To rise and dominate in WURs, the government encourages the 5-100 Universities to modify their missions, identify their ‘priority areas’, and “integrate two university models, the research-intensive and entrepreneurial models of universities with strong departments of research and innovation commercialisation” (Video 2, 2017).

This research-oriented transformation of the 5-100 Universities has also been boosted by WUR movement, since “research and its traditional outputs is the primary and easiest measurement, acting as a proxy for excellence” (Hazelkorn, 2009, p.3). Consequently, the Universities transform or ‘rebrand’ their identities through the lens of WURs to marketise their strengths for competing in the research and innovation market, the technological services market, and in WURs.

Therefore, the discourse of ‘excellence’ in the Russian context is predominantly built on ‘research excellence’ discourses which draw on the interplay of the concepts ‘commodification of research’ and ‘marketisation’. In other words, highly market-oriented discourses reveal the nature of the universities behaving like real businesses competing to sell their products. For example, there are many discourses, such as ‘enhancement of research and innovation productivity’, the linkages and cooperation with ‘business and industry’, the ‘commercialisation’ of ‘world-class intellectual products’, where HE is represented as ‘the academic sector’ (RAEI, 2018).

Competitiveness in the global ‘talent market’

Talent recruitment may be regarded as another shortcut to the top 100 WURs along the enhancement of research

outputs. Commenting on the strategic objectives of the Project 5-100, Vladimir Knyagin (the CEO of the Centre for Strategic Research 'North-West') explains:

We [the people related to the Project 5-100] join the race for ideas, money, top professors, but also we join the competition for the most mobile, fast, intelligent, flexible, and capable of self-development people, for talents (Video 2, 2017).

It is important to examine how the discourses of 'research enhancement' overlap this concept of 'talent' and investigate what kind of talent might benefit most to universities' reputation and why it is highly valuable.

Talent attraction is considered as one of the strategic goals of the Project 5-100 which stresses the need for the "internationalisation in all spheres, development of infrastructure to recruit the best scientists, faculty, managers and students" (RAEI, 2018). In terms of the expected outcomes of the Russian initiative, the 5-100 Universities are also supposed to ensure at least 10 per cent of international faculty members and 15 per cent of overseas students in each University, apart from entering into the top 100 WURs (RAEI, 2018).

Although 'university managers' and 'international students' are evaluated within the concept of 'talent', the main emphasis of the Project 5-100 is on recruiting "the world's leading scientists to develop an outstanding academic reputation by doing breakthrough research" (RAEI, 2018). It also targets "more youthful faculty members and researchers with time spent and know-how gained in academic and research spheres, in leading international and Russian Universities and research organizations" (RAEI, 2018).

Within the dataset, internal and international 'academic mobility' programmes for faculty and researchers are considered as a means of bolstering internationalisation and talent recruitment in the form of internships, advanced training, professional retraining, and exchange programs. Apart from boosting 'academic mobility' and developing the 'infrastructure' to attract talent, the 5-100 Universities seek to improve 'international recruitment outlook' and, generally speaking, 'global outlook' of Russian universities, since it is highly weighted in WURs. The overall number of international students is also regarded as an indicator of the world's recognition of the Russian professional education and the share in the global education market held by the Russian professional education (Government 792, 2013).

Thus, the recurrent discourse of 'competition' colonises numerous fields of HE, in particular the realm of HE internationalisation, which can be regarded as 'competition for talent' within a neoliberal paradigm or in more economic terms - competition for 'human resources' or 'human capital' in the 'global talent market'. One of the crucial aspects of this 'race for talent' is that it stresses the importance of attracting 'young talent', since "young people are the most important component of human resources in the country's economy" (Government 792, 2013, p.256).

Notably, HE can also be regarded as a major provider of 'human capital' which is essential for WCUs and a country's socio-economic growth and development. In other words, 'academic mobility' as global human capital flow is crucial for scientific discovery and "helps to form the long-run international linkages that foster innovation and knowledge creation at the international level" (OECD, 2014, p.15).

Competitiveness in the 'reputation' market

CDA has revealed that the need for modernisation of Russian education may be justified by the government's aspiration to gain wider recognition of its HE system among developed countries and drive up its 'international

prestige' as a country' in the global arena. From the government's perspective, the discourse of the national education system is commonly described as "a crucial factor for Russia's positioning among the world's leading countries, for its international prestige as a country possessing a high level of culture, science, and education" (Ministry of Education, 2001, p.264).

There are some discourses around the Russian HE system which signal that despite its "world recognition, obvious achievements as an education system" (Video 1, 2017), it has not been fully represented in the global education market. Thus, there is a certain emphasis on the country's system-wide socio-economic crisis which happened in the 1990-s, hindered all the positive changes in HE, and resulted in Russia's falling out of the global HE agenda (Ministry of Education, 2001).

Nowadays, the government strives to 'maximise' Russia's visibility within the global research and education markets and 'gain back' its leading position in the world elite with the help of the Project 5-100 or better saying WURs (Video 1, 2017; RAEI, 2018).

The implementation of the set measures will allow at least five Russian universities to pave their way to the top 100 world university rankings by 2020 which will foster the restoration of dignified reputation of the Russian higher education system in the international arena, as well as will boost the attractiveness of leading Russian universities in the market of highly intellectual and elite academic workforce. Moreover, these measures will be a catalyst in the process of enhancing international competitiveness and attractiveness of Russian universities as a whole (Government 792, 2013, p.105).

This policy document reinforces the discourse of 'rankings' as a key indicator of 'reputation' and 'carrier of excellence' (Rostan and Vaira, 2011) in the global education market. Notably, by overarching the discourses of 'dignified reputation', 'attractiveness', 'elite academic force', the discourse of 'rankings' acquires indirectly an additional meaning, high 'quality' of the 5-100 Universities. This meaning of 'quality' is built up through 'foreign academics, staff, and students' who bring with them 'prestige' and the recognition of 'global reputation'. Furthermore, it is possible to trace an intention to rationalise the position of the Russian HE system among the 'world elite' and its right to expand its share in the 'global education market' by stating that "our [Russian] education system has worldwide recognition and obvious achievements as a system" (Video 1, 2017).

Apart from being carriers of 'reputation' and 'excellence', WURs turn out to be a 'proxy for competitiveness' (Hazelkorn, 2014) and an indicator of a country's 'visibility'. For instance, the number of Russian universities in the world's top-100 universities is represented as an indicator of the competitiveness of the Russian professional education and the development of the Centres of Excellence in Russia (Government 792, 2013).

Interestingly, WURs appear to measure not only a country's academic reputation or research excellence, but also shed light on its standing in the world and reflect "a nation's status in geopolitical terms" (Hazelkorn, 2015). Competing for their new positioning in the geopolitical system, many countries are likely to make use of WURs as a "soft power" (Hazelkorn, 2014).

Consequently, WURs happen to be an accelerator of the "reputation race" (Hazelkorn, 2015) in Russian HE which leads to the commodification of academic reputation of universities in the global education market. For example, the 5-100 Universities "that combine a rich heritage and promising future" are portrayed as holders of Russian "famous scientific heritage" and "deep-rooted academic traditions" which can give them a crucial competitive advantage in the research market (THE, 2015). Due to WURs, this academic reputation can be easily identified and measured, in particular through analysing and evaluating various quantitative data in the form of research output and research-

related activity (including citations, the number of researchers, academics, and postgraduate students.).

The analysis also concludes that the Russian government seeks to gain both the internal legitimacy (in terms of fostering 'economic growth' and 'modernising' the Russian academia to 'compete' in the international arena) and global legitimacy (in form of boosting Russia's 'reputation' and 'attractiveness' of the HE system abroad and improving its 'leading position' worldwide) to rationalise the implementation of the Project 5-100.

Conclusions and implications for policymakers

A number of scholars (Froumin and Lisutkin, 2015; Hazelkorn, 2009) conclude that initiatives and policies for excellence implemented worldwide reveal a common trend among many governments which intend to expand their control over HE systems and increase their role in shaping and modernising HEIs through introducing WURs to the HEagenda.

CDA has identified that rationales behind the implementation of the Project 5-100 are predominately political and socio-economic which could be explained by the historical events entailing numerous social and economic issues in the country (e.g. the collapse of the Soviet Union and following the global economic and financial crisis in Russia in the late 2000s). Over the last two decades, the modernisation agenda of the Russian HE system has been inspired by the government's aspiration to foster the transition to the knowledge-driven economy and accelerate a socio-economic growth. Rostan and Vaira (2011) suggest that WURs under policies for excellence tend to be used as powerful rhetoric devices to legitimise systems' modernisation reform rather than as real instruments to improve systems' and institutions' performance. Furthermore, Excellence Initiatives happen to be a 'legitimising argument' to rationalise and steer the state funding to a small group of universities and as a result to reshape HE systems in terms of producing formalized vertical stratification or reproducing previous hierarchies in national HE (Rostan and Vaira, 2011).

The analytical framework designed to research 'excellence' in Russian HE has been drawn on the concept of 'competitiveness' which is essential from the government's perspective for achieving global 'excellence'. In other words, in the Russian context 'excellence' in HE may be interpreted as 'competitiveness enhancement'.

Consequently, CDA discloses that the discourse of 'excellence' in Russian HE has been constructed and shaped through hybridising three dominant orders of discourse. Firstly, the 'knowledge-based society' order of discourse emphasises the importance of the 5-100 Universities through the discourse of 'modernisation' of Russian HE, through the promotion of a 'research culture' among other universities, and also through the production of 'innovation' for accelerating the transition to the knowledge-based economy. Secondly, the 'marketisation' order of discourse in HE become evident through the commodification of research and teaching produced by the 5-100 Universities to supply Russian intellectual production and educational programmes to the global innovation and education services markets. Thirdly, the 'managerialism' order of discourse emerge through the introduction of NPM techniques and discourses of performance-based funding in the 5-100 Universities to encourage greater competition among Russian universities and as a result to drive up quality improvement and competitiveness enhancement.

The findings reveal that the Russian government adopts a narrow understanding of 'excellence' which privileges the research dimension over the teaching and learning activities, and emphasises it primarily as a tool to achieve Russia's aspirations for economic and social development rather than a target for enhancing and improving quality of research and teaching in the country's HEIs. From the government's perspective, 'excellence' is something which can emerge and get developed only through the metrics and performance indicators of WURs and through the tight control of a special council, various boards of trustees or educational managers, which limits even further the definition of this

concept.

WURs have also proven to be ‘a policy instrument’ (Hazelkorn, 2014), in the form of guidelines for university transformation, benchmarks for progress evaluation, and tools for measuring universities’ accountability and the outcomes of the Excellence Initiative implementation. Furthermore, the discourse of ‘excellence’ with its neoliberal nature appears to become very powerful and productive in Russian HE in terms of having impact on the government’s funding decisions. Commenting on the prospective of the Project 5-100, the former Minister of Education and Science, Olga Vasilieva proposed “to select only up to four most effective universities and invest the rest of the subsidies into the development of these universities [...]. The other universities will report on the work performed and money spent” (TASS, 2017). It reflects the essence of ‘excellence’ revealed through awarding only high performing universities which contributes to inequality in the sector in terms of singling out the most ‘effective’ and ‘efficient’ HEIs for investment.

This study seeks to raise awareness of the discourse of ‘excellence’ in the realm of HE policy and question whether neoliberal forces in terms of free markets, competition, and NPM are the only premises to modernise education systems and nurture ‘excellence’. In western democracies, the neoliberal culture of individualism and competition in HE, as well as the emphasis on managerialism and performativity within HEIs have already undermined the professionalism of teachers in the sense of transforming them into managed professionals who are required to operate efficiently and effectively within global educational markets (Olssen *et al.*, 2004). Consequently, it is essential to reconsider the extent to which tangible benefits to a country’s HE system development are due to emphasising ‘competitiveness enhancement’ and ‘quality assurance’ instead of fostering, for example, ‘teaching excellence’ along the social democratic lines, ‘quality improvement’ or ‘academic freedom and autonomy’. Since the Project 5-100 is still under way, the findings of this study may encourage education researchers and policymakers to investigate the transformation of the 5-100 Universities’ identities and analyse the outcomes of the Excellence Initiative.

Notes

1. The two Russian universities, Lomonosov’s Moscow State University and Saint Petersburg State University, which have a special status and funded separately from other Russian HEIs, have already entered WURs and are not participating in the Project 5-100.
2. ‘Proyekt Povysheniya Konkurentosposobnosti Vedushchikh Rossiyskikh Univesritetov Sredi Vedushchikh Mirovykh Nauchno-Obrazovatel’nykh Tsentrov’

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Academic Excellence as 'Competitiveness Enhancement' in Russian Higher Education

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Abstract

Purpose – This study ~~seeks-sets out~~ to analyse critically the Russian Academic Excellence Initiative (the Project 5-100), designed to propel five leading Russian universities into world university rankings (WURs) by 2020, and research it through the lens of neoliberalism. The paper intends to reveal recurrent discourses and dominant orders of discourse constituting the overall concept of 'excellence' in Russian higher education (HE) policy.

Methodology – Since the Project 5-100 has been designed in line with a neoliberal model of academic excellence initiatives, emphasising 'competition as a driver of excellence' (Hazelkorn, 2009), Fairclough's approach to critical discourse analysis (CDA) has been adopted as a qualitative research method. There is no universally accepted definition of 'excellence' in HE policy; therefore, this CDA also aims at revealing the Russian government's vision of the concept and its voice in HE policy.

Findings – The paper concludes that the government reinforces neoliberal discourse on the HE agenda and transforms 5-100 Universities' identities through emphasising the role of WURs in modernising the HE system. Consequently, within the neoliberal paradigm, the Project 5-100 can be regarded as a manifestation of the commodification of 'excellence' in Russian HE policy.

Originality/value – This research ~~intends to aims-at~~ broadening knowledge of Excellence Initiatives in HE policy and revealing their features and neoliberal natures. It also seeks to contribute in terms of showcasing a qualitative study of the Project 5-100 for future comparative analyses of similar HE policies.

Keywords: Excellence, Russian Higher Education Policy, Rankings, CDA, Neoliberalism

Article Classification: Research paper

Introduction

In many countries around the globe, the university as a crucial part of tertiary education has become a key instrument for boosting social and economic growth and developing a knowledge-based society to compete effectively in global knowledge economies (Altbach, 2013; Mohrman *et al.*, 2008; Salmi, 2003). The production of scientific knowledge, research, and innovation has transformed into a driver or alternative engine of economic growth alongside the traditional sources of wealth, including land, labor, and capital (Etzkowitz, 2003; Salmi, 2003). Furthermore, the university acts as a crucial pillar of human capital development since it provides not only highly-skilled workforce for labor market, but also it trains postgraduate students and equips young researchers and scientists with knowledge and skills essential for producing and fostering research and innovations (Salmi, 2003).

In the global knowledge-based economy, world university rankings (WURs) have triggered numerous education policies and initiatives worldwide to develop high-ranking research universities within national systems as engines of socio-economic growth and as a symbol of achievements and prestige of countries' higher education (HE) systems (Marginson and Van der Wende, 2007). It can be explained by the fact that WURs appear to gauge world-class status and prestige, provide university accountability, and measure national competitiveness (Hazelkorn, 2009).

Both developed and developing countries have designed and implemented HE policies aimed to attain world-class quality and status and enhance 'excellence' of their leading universities. Rostan *et al.* (2011, p.viii) explains that "excellence as a policy issue reflects the institutional and competitive pressures exerted by the global rankings movement on national systems and institutions". Although historically this type of initiatives has been the purview of developed and ex-imperial countries, for developing countries such policies appear to be important in terms of joining the global race for top positions in WURs and retaining/attracting talent, as well as gaining their political weight worldwide and expanding their presence in the international HE market.

This article sets out to analyse critically the Project 5-100 aiming at establishing a small group of leading Russian universities which have been subsidised by the Russian government to bolster their global competitive advantages and consequently enter the top 100 WURs by 2020.

'Excellence' and WURs world university rankings in HE higher education policies

HE has turned to be "the focus of intense policy and geo-political interest" (Hazelkorn, 2009, p.1) since its significance for economic development and innovation growth has been increasingly well-recognised. HE has also become crucial to international competitiveness, and its global quality and status have turned to be vital performance indicators of a nation's HE system (Hazelkorn, 2009). Therefore, governments' interests in the global status and performance of their national HE systems have reinforced the importance of WURs in terms of being "a proxy for competitiveness" (Hazelkorn, 2014). Despite their contested nature and numerous methodological flaws (Hazelkorn, 2009; Rostan *et al.*, 2011; Marginson and Van der Wende, 2007; Blanco-Ramírez and Berger, 2014), WURs have transformed into "a policy instrument" (Hazelkorn, 2014) and had a significant impact on HE policies worldwide:

The instantaneous global response to the publication of the first global rankings and its imitators has had a significant impact and influence on higher education – accelerating the modernization agenda, providing some public accountability and transparency, emphasizing institutional performance to improve quality, and promoting a global 'reputation race' system (Hazelkorn, 2009, p.8).

Consequently, WURs have become "the de facto gauge of excellence" (Hazelkorn, 2014) or "the main carriers of

excellence” (Rostan and Vaira, 2011) in global HE.

Nevertheless, ‘excellence’ is an ambiguous and vague concept in HE, and it is often implemented with no clear explanation of its meaning. What is more, it has a number of understandings which can be privileged or marginalised by different stakeholders in certain contexts. For example, Little and Locke (2011) explain that ‘excellence’ can be interpreted as a positional good for students, as an aspirational goal for educational leaders or policymakers to improve quality, as a form of reputational advantage for HEIs or as a means of achieving governmental economic and social goals.

This contested concept is “historically and situationally contingent, [since] the definitions of excellence are located within shifting social, economic and political contexts and are underpinned by broader discourses or ideologies of higher education” (Brusoni *et al.*, 2014, p.23). Moreover, its meanings tend to change according to the global competitive environment which nowadays is dominated by “the *new managerialist* practices, as the state seeks to increase the economic return from higher education; [by] the general shift from elite to mass higher education systems; and [by] the *rankings*” (Brusoni *et al.*, 2014, p.23). Thus, ‘excellence’ is defined by proxy indicators rather than by intrinsic characteristics.

Rostan and Vaira (2011) and Brusoni *et al.* (2014) suggest that WURs are considered as one of the main carriers of excellence reflecting various governments’ power and their political interests (e.g. in terms of driving up countries’ international prestige and maximising the visibility of their HE systems worldwide) and as tools to adopt a traditional view on excellence which mainly favours the research activity rather than the teaching and learning one. Marginson and Van der Wende (2007) argue that some global ranking companies (e.g. such as Shanghai Ranking Consultancy and QS Quacquarelli Symonds) tend to focus deliberately more on research performance and less on teaching and learning activities, which may be provoked by difficulties inherent in assessing and comparing ‘teaching excellence’ on a worldwide basis and generating data based on the measures of ‘value added’ during the educational process. Whilst other ranking companies (like such as the Times Higher Education magazine) tend to reward more higher education institutions’ (HEIs) internationalisation and presence in global education markets and favour less research (Marginson and Van der Wende, 2007). Therefore, the emphasis on research and its dominant position in defining ‘excellence’ can be attributed to the fact that “the hegemonic rhetoric of knowledge society and economy stresses the role of scientific and technological research as the main lever for innovation-based competitiveness” (Rostan *et al.*, 2011, p.xvi).

Furthermore, global comparisons and competition are possible only in relation to one certain type of HEIs the world-class research university, which due to its features has become dominant in WURs (Marginson and Van der Wende, 2007). There is no universally accepted definition of world-class universities (WCUs), but what is known is that they represent a small proportion of global HE, have diversified sources of income, concentrate top talents from overseas, generate ground-breaking research output, and enforce governance policies favouring high quality research and teaching (Salmi, 2009; Mohrman *et al.*, 2008).

However, Brusoni *et al.* (2014) explains that ‘excellence’ has no meaning if every university is excellent and therefore this discourse offers no way of distinguishing the performance of individual institutions. This also implies that the concept of ‘excellence’ is necessarily exclusive, carrying connotations of distinction in the Bourdieusian sense.

Policies for ‘excellence’ in Russian higher educationHE

Many countries worldwide, including China, Singapore, Canada, the USA, South Korea, Russia have already implemented excellence initiatives (Salmi, 2009) to boost research productivity and enhance overall competitiveness of their national HE systems globally, as indicated in WURs. According to Froumin and Lisytukin (2015), the expression ‘*excellence initiative*’ has been borrowed from the German HE policy texts which define it as an initiative aimed at promoting world-class research and improving the quality of universities and research HEIs overall transforming Germany in a widely recognised research location and making it more globally competitive.

One of the major features of various policies for excellence is that they seek to drive differentiation and segmentation of a national HE system along the model of the WCU, by selecting a group of elite universities to concentrate resources into more efficient, productive, visible HEIs (Hazelkorn, 2009). This helps to raise the international reputation and prestige of a country’s research HEIs, as well as the sector overall, and attracts international and domestic researchers, students, and additional funds (OECD, 2014).

In terms of the Russian Federation, there have already been adopted three Excellence Initiatives, including ‘Federal University Programme (2005)’, ‘Innovative University Programme (2006)’, ‘National Research University Programme (2009)’, with the core mission to boost and strengthen world-class research productivity of Russian universities.

In May 2013, the Russian Academic Excellence Project was launched in accordance with the Presidential Decree of the Russian Federation № 599 *On measures to realize state policy in the sphere of education and science*, the Project 5-100 “wants to tap into the full academic and research potential of Russian Universities while bolstering their positions in the global education market” (RAEI, 2018). This constitutes a significant historical shift in understanding of the purpose of HEIs, as Russian HEIs used to specialise in teaching exclusively, since the leading role in publications-centered research previously belonged to the Russian Academy of Sciences (Froumin and Lisytukin, 2015). The name of the Project 5-100 reflects the expected outcome of this initiative – to propel at least five of Russia’s universities into the top 100 WURs by 2020. On a competitive basis, 21 Russian universities have been selected to receive additional state subsidies to “maximise [their] competitive position [...] in the global research and education market” (RAEI, 2018), as well as improve their positioning in the top 100 WURs and Rankings by Subjects, including the Times Higher Education World University Ranking, QS World University Rankings, and Academic Rankings of World Universities. Thus, the crucial difference between the Project 5-100 and the other three Excellence Initiatives is that it implements WURs as a policy instrument to drive changes in Russian HE and transform a small number of Russian universities into WCUs.

Interestingly, Hazelkorn (2009) singles out two major models of Excellence-driven policies and initiatives, such as the neoliberal and social-democratic models. The neoliberal model intends to produce reputational (vertical) differentiation by introducing “rankings as a free market mechanism to drive the concentration of *excellence* in a small number of research-intensive universities” for competing globally (Hazelkorn, 2009, p.7). A number of Excellence Initiatives based on this neoliberal model have been implemented in China, France, Germany, and Korea with the aim to create a small number of WCUs focusing on research performance (Hazelkorn, 2009; Salmi, 2009). Within this model, competition or competitiveness enhancement serves as a driver for excellence which highlights its neoliberal nature.

In contrast, the social-democratic model aims at establishing a system of horizontally differentiated student

experiences and HEIs with high performance and globally oriented missions (Hazelkorn, 2009). Rather than funding and transforming a small group of elite institutions into WCUs, the governments (including Australia, Ireland, and Norway) strive for fostering “excellence wherever it occurs” by supporting high quality HEIs throughout the country (Hazelkorn, 2009).

Methodology

To examine the Project 5-100 through the prism of neoliberalism and identify the Russian government’s voice in shaping ‘excellence’ in Russian HE policy, Fairclough’s approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been adopted as a form of a text-oriented analysis. This approach is significant for this research as it seeks “to develop ways of analyzing language which address its involvement in the workings of contemporary capitalist societies” (Fairclough, 2013, p.1) since capitalism, or its widely recognised ~~and dominant~~ ‘neoliberal’ version, has triggered and entailed a number of serious changes in politics and economies, in education and healthcare, in the working environment and lifestyle. ~~etc.~~

The study applies Fairclough’s three-dimensional model (1993; 2013) which draws on an analytical framework aimed at combining three different stages of analysis, including text analysis for describing spoken or written language texts, processing analysis for producing and interpreting texts, and social analysis for explaining discourses embedded in socio-historical contexts. It also adopts Fairclough’s (2013) understanding of *discourse* which is regarded as “a complex set of relations”, including the relations of communication (between people who speak, write, and communicate with each other in other ways), the relations between certain communicative events (newspaper article, policy documents, etc.), and the relations of complex discursive ‘objects’ (language, discourses, and genres). Furthermore, *discourse* can be understood as “a way of signifying experience from a particular perspective” (Fairclough, 1993, p.138), in other words, it is seen as some representations of social practices from a specific perspective.

As the object of CDA, the ‘emergence and constitution of the discourses’ (Fairclough, 2012) of ‘excellence’ in Russian HE has been chosen in this research. To identify the discourses of ‘excellence’ within the field of prior discourses and specify the relations between various discourses drawn together to constitute various orders of discourse, a genealogical approach has been implemented (Fairclough, 2012). According to Fairclough (2003, p.206), discourses can be revealed and networked in a “relatively durable social structuring of language”, *order of discourse*, which is “a particular social ordering of relationships amongst different ways of making meaning, i.e. different discourses and genres and styles”. For instance, it can be the marketisation order ~~of discourse~~ or managerial order of discourse which have spread around public organisations and institutions, including universities.

The text dataset for this CDA is based on different resources of various genres, including governmental policy documents, official texts from the governmental website pages both in English and Russian, news articles published on the website, the transcripts of the videos released on the official website and YouTube. In total, forty-two resources were identified through searching the Internet, later imported, and analysed with the help of NVivo (a qualitative data analysis software). In the process of rereading thoroughly and tracking recurrent ideas and dominant discourses, 21 key texts (see Table 1) were identified and coded following inductively oriented approach (Wodak and Meyer, 2009). The texts coded earlier were recoded and used to design a table with dominant discourses based on recurrent codes and numerous citations from documents for eliminating minor codes and developing an analytical framework.

The key texts have been selected based on the following inclusion criteria:

- published by the Russian governmental bodies or released on the official 5-100 website;
- mentioned and referred in the main 5-100 policy documents;
- and publicly available on the Internet.

Table 1. The key texts of CDA to examine the Project 5-100 and their in-text citations.

Government policy documents
Government 1662 (2008) <i>Concept of long-term social and economic development of Russian Federation until 2020</i>
President Decree 203 (2017) <i>The Concept of Development of Information Society in the Russian Federation 2017-2030</i>
President Decree 599 (2012) <i>On Measures to Implement the State Policy in Education and Science</i>
Government 960 (2016) <i>The Directive of the Government of the Russian Federation No 960-r</i>
Government 211 (2013) <i>On Measures to Support Russian Leading Universities in Enhancing their Competitiveness among Global Research and Education Centres</i>
Government 281 (2017) <i>The Directive of the Government of the Russian Federation No. 281-R</i>
Government 2006 (2012) <i>The Directive of the Government of the Russian Federation No 2006-r</i>
Government 301 (2014) <i>The Development of Science and Technology 2013-2014</i>
Ministry of Education (2006) <i>The Development Strategy of Science and Innovation in the Russian Federation until 2015</i>
Ministry of Education (2001) <i>The Concept of Modernisation of Russian Education until 2010</i>
Government 792 (2013) <i>On the State Programme of Education Development 2013-2020</i>
Policy texts on the official website
RAEI (Russian Academic Excellence Initiative), <i>Russian Academic Excellence Project 5-100</i> (available at: http://5top100.com/)
Russian Project 5-100, <i>Russian Academic Excellence Project 5-100</i> (available at: http://5top100.ru/)
Journals and news articles on the official website
Times Higher Education (2014) <i>First XV: How the Project 5-100 stars are transforming the Russian academy</i>
Russian Academic Excellence Project (2016) <i>Managing academic excellence initiatives: a real intellectual challenge</i>
HERB (Higher Education in Russia and Beyond) (2015) <i>It is All about Rankings</i>
News 5-100 (2015) <i>The Number of Russian Universities in the Rankings Increases Almost Sevenfold.</i>
THE (Times Higher Education) (2015) <i>2020 Vision: a Focus on Research and Internationalization for Russia's Project 5-100</i>
Video transcripts
Official Video (2015) <i>The Project 5-100</i>
Video 1 (2013) <i>The Project 5-100-2020: Session I of Strategic Planning</i>
Video 2 (2014) <i>The Project 5-100-2020: Session II of Strategic Planning</i>

This framework has been designed only for analysing the policy from a government’s perspective, thus it might be difficult to apply it to examine a policy, for instance, from academics’ or students’ viewpoints. Moreover, due to the nature of CDA, the analysis has adopted mainly a critical stance, and it does not aim to conduct a policy evaluation of the Project 5-100.

The historic background and rationales behind the policy for ‘excellence’ in Russia

The policy texts position the initiative for ‘excellence’ in a particular historical context. Due to the collapse of the Soviet Union and following economic crises, the texts suggest the country “has fallen out from the global historical context for 20 years” and consequently has been “lagging behind” the developed economies (Video 1, 2017). Like many other countries exporting natural resources, Russia has strived to tackle its ‘backwardness’ and foster its transition from the resource-based economy to the knowledge-based economy. That “will allow to expand drastically the competitive potential of Russian economy through enhancing its comparative advantages in science, education,

and high technologies, and on this basis, it will allow to implement new resources for economic growth and well-being improvement” (Government 1662, 2008, p.7). These claims evoke key neoliberal tenets associated with globalisation.

Moreover, the strategic document *Russian Government 1662* (2008) explains that the new economic model will be drawn on Russia’s ‘competitive advantages’ in the form of traditional sectors (energy industry, transport and agriculture sectors) alongside science-intensive industries implying the breakthrough of ‘human capital advancement’, the development of cutting edge high-tech production, and the transformation of innovation output into a key revenue for the country’s ‘economic growth’.

A critical condition for the development of innovation economy [as a type of knowledge-based economy] appears to be modernisation of the [Russian] education system which is a foundation of dynamic economic growth and societal development and a key factor of people’s well-being and the country’s security (Government 1662, 2008, p.22).

In the example above, the discourses of ‘modernisation’ of the Russian HE system is formulated and constructed on the discourse of ‘knowledge-based society’. For instance, ‘modernisation’ can be identified as one of the solutions to overcome numerous hurdles posed by Russia’s underperforming economy. Notably, the overall discourse of ‘Russian education’ is shaped and constructed through numerous economic terms which may be explained by “colonization” (Fairclough, 1993) of ‘education discourse’ by ‘knowledge-based economy’ (the latter turns out to be a dominant order of discourse).

Interestingly, Fairclough (2002) describes the New Capitalism (or neoliberalism) as ‘knowledge-’ or ‘information-based’, since it appears to be dependent on ‘knowledge’, ‘new technologies’, and ‘innovation’. In fact, the restructuring of capitalism (and its latest form of neoliberalism) is knowledge-driven and discourse-led. Neoliberal discourse is not limited to the economic field, “it also embraces the ramifications of economic transformation in other fields including culture, education, national politics, international relations and international security” (Fairclough, 2002, p.164).

The role of the 5-100 Universities in the modernisation process can be regarded as building up ‘competitive advantages’ in order to catch up with highly performing countries in the international research and education services markets. The discourse of ‘modernisation’ can also be identified in the intended outcomes of the initiative, in other words the implementation of the Project 5-100 “sent a new satellite into orbit to *assist in the process of revamping Russian higher education* and make and giving it a contemporary” (RAEI, 2018).

Since the year 2000 one of the key directions of the structural change in the professional education system has been the selection of a cluster of leading universities for accelerating the development of higher education system (the drivers of modernisation). Lomonosov’s Moscow State University, Saint Petersburg State University^[1], federal and national research universities have designed and implemented development programmes approved by the government (Government 792, 2013, p.22).

Thus, one of the targets of ‘modernisation’ in Russian HE is to drive vertical differentiation and segmentation of HEIs to select ‘a cluster’ of high-performing Russian universities with a special mission to be the “drivers of modernisation” and “agents of innovation”.

From the government’s perspective, “the formation of a cluster of leading universities fostering modernisation of the [Russian] HE system as a whole” (Government 792, 2013, p.31) will accelerate growth and sustain the country’s

economy capacity and competitiveness. It shows that instead of modernising and reforming all Russian universities as a whole, the government concentrates large resources to “design real Russian cases recognised by the world academic community of successful examples of effective university development” (Government 792, 2013, p.105).

By its nature, the discourse of ‘excellence’ in HE implies some hierarchies required to single out and label ‘outstanding quality’ and a ‘special status’ which should be recognised and awarded accordingly. Consequently, ‘competition’ and ‘competitiveness’ appear to be essential for promoting ‘excellence’, since these two concepts imply the production of hierarchies in HE (Hazelkorn, 2009).

Critical Discourse Analysis of ‘excellence’ discourse

The word ‘excellence’ is frequently observed in the names of similar educational initiatives (e.g. the German Excellence Initiative ‘Die Exzellenzinitiative’, The French Excellence Initiative ‘Initiatives d’excellence’, the Spanish International campus of Excellence ‘Campus de Excelencia Internacional’). Nevertheless, the name of the Project ‘the Russian Academic Excellence Initiative Project 5-100’ has been rendered ~~and interpreted~~ differently in Russian – ‘Competitiveness Enhancement of Leading Russian Universities among Global Research and Education Centers’^[2]. Therefore, the name reveals that ‘excellence’ in Russian HE policy is interpreted and recontextualised as ‘competitiveness’ which links back to the neoliberal model and the nature of this initiative emphasising “competition as a driver of excellence” (Hazelkorn, 2009).

A linguistic reason behind it might be straightforward: there is not any widely accepted expression which will be a word by word translation of ‘Academic Excellence’ in Russian. However, due to the rise and popularity of initiatives for excellence worldwide, it has become possible to track the emergence of a new term in Russian ‘*akademicheskoye prevoskhodstvo*’ (which is a loan translation of ‘academic excellence’) in Russian HE policy, in particular in mass media articles and governmental website documents, but not in official policy documention yet.

In the analysed dataset, the concept ‘excellence’ has been tightly related to the concept of ‘competitiveness’ (*konkurentosposobnost*) and has acquired a new meaning which emphasises the need to build up and enhance Russia’s ‘capacity’ and ‘international competitiveness’ in order “to maximize the competitive position of a group of leading Russian universities in the global research and education market” (RAEI, 2018). Blackmore (2016) explains that academic excellence is inherently competitive, and consequently ‘competitiveness’ appears to be encouraged deliberately through government policy, changes in communication technologies and the globalisation of HE. ~~The concept of ‘excellence’ in HE is highly multidimensional, and CDA is needed to identify multiple discursive and social practices which constitute the concept in the context of Russian HE and disclose its neoliberal nature. Consequently Thus,~~ it is crucial to examine the relations between ‘excellence’ and ‘competitiveness’ as a key starting point of the analysis.

Competitiveness in the national education market

In the era of neoliberal globalisation, the Russian government, like many others worldwide, tends to reduce its funding to public sectors (including HE) which encourages numerous Russian HEIs to compete for scarce state funds and generate their own revenue (Altbach *et al.*, 2009).

The Project 5-100 provides an example of the Russian government’s attempt to strengthen state control in HE through “the implementation of mechanisms aimed at ensuring transparent funding and promoting competition among higher professional education institutions” (Government 792, 2013, p.102). Speaking about various Excellence

Initiatives, Isaac Froumin points out that “university development becomes increasingly driven by the state, whereas previously universities challenged governments and were their own engines for development. What we see now is that governments challenge universities to evolve in a particular direction. Academic excellence initiatives are paving the way to a model where state control is higher” (RAEI, 2018).

Consequently, through implementing different education policies based on providing state subsidies, the Russian government intends to stimulate the national education market by encouraging competition among Russian universities. This provision of subsidies also serves as a tool to rationalise the government’s more active role in reshaping, modernising, transforming the 5-100 Universities which as a result appear to lose their autonomy through the agreements signed to receive the state funding.

To join the global race for ‘excellence’, the 5-100 Universities have to compete for the government’s funding which brings not only some additional resources, but also entails a significant change in the university management, in particular the imposition of the New Public Management (NPM) and the introduction of highly managerial discourse onto the agenda of the 5-100 Universities (Government 792, 2013; RAEI, 2018; Video 1, 2017). The Project 5-100 seeks to develop and promote an effective model of university management aimed at the achievement of competitiveness and implementation of Russia’s socio-economic development programmes:

The main directions of university management development are accountability for results, professionalism and autonomy in term of identifying a strategic development goal, ability to find creative approaches to university activities (Government 792, 2013, p.92).

For example, one of the ways to impose NPM ~~in-on~~ the 5-100 Universities is to stress the importance of enhancing ‘competitiveness’, increasing ‘efficiency’ of the state subsidies, improving the ‘performance’ of the Universities, and consequently, tightening ‘financial control’ and improving ‘quality assurance’ of the Project. As a result, the Council on Competitiveness Enhancement of Leading Russian Universities among Global Research and Education Centres (the Council) “has been designed to enjoy long-term service as a permanent interdepartmental advisory body” and act as “the main governance body of the Project 5-100” (RAEI, 2018).

One of the key policy documents, (Government 211, 2013) articulates and prescribes in detail a new type of relation between the 5-100 Universities and the Council, including all the set of responsibilities and duties. For instance, the latter has to assist in the selection of the 5-100 Universities (on a competitive basis), review and evaluate the Universities’ reports for recommending the Ministry of Education and Science whether to provide certain 5-100 Universities with state subsidies or not, ~~etc.~~ The Council is also responsible for advising the Universities on WURs to choose to match ‘performance indicators’ of action plans or road maps (the strategic plans to rebrand the Universities to move them into the top 100 WURs). The Universities’ road maps tend to be formulated and based “on the metrics of the world university rankings (including Subject Rankings) recommended by the Council” (Government 211, 2013, p.5).

The textual analysis reveals that the Council plays a significant role in the Excellence Initiative in terms of introducing numerous discourses of the audit culture. The Council is represented as an external quality assurance body responsible for ‘evaluating’, ‘monitoring’, and ‘measuring’ the ‘performance’ of the 5-100 Universities. What is more, this audit culture is legitimised and rationalised in the texts through the need to boost global competitiveness, control the state funding, improve quality, and eventually propel the ~~5-100~~ Universities into the top 100 WURs.

Another means to develop ‘an efficient management structure’ in the 5-100 Universities is “to implement

measures to establish a succession pool for senior university management and attract specialists with experience in international and Russian Universities and research organisations to leadership positions” (Government 211, 2013, p.4). To provide internal quality assurance and make the management more ‘transparent’ and ‘publicly accountable’ within the 5-100 Universities, Boards of Trustees have been formed on the basis of ‘employers’ and other ‘stakeholders’, which appears to be “an important criterion to improve quality and relevance of academic and research activities” (Government 792, 2013, p.92). As a result, a new class of education managers emerges who are not necessarily academics or researchers but trained to make the 5-100 Universities more efficient, higher performing in WURs, and more globally recognised.

Therefore, NPM rhetoric can be represented through the various discourses blended and hybridised to embed and reinforce the ‘performativity culture’ in the 5-100 Universities, including such as ‘efficient management’, ‘road maps’, ‘performance indicators’, ‘metrics of rankings’, and ‘positions in WURs’.

The strategic development plans comprise numerous performance indicators which are formulated and drawn on various metrics of WURs. Consequently Thus, the size of the state subsidies is calculated through a formula measuring the performance of 5-100 Universities against the indicators and their positions in WURs ~~(Government 211, 2013).~~ Thus, and the best scorers ~~among the 5-100 Universities (e.g. Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology, National University of Science and Technology MISiS, National University—Higher School of Economics)~~ receive higher subsidies than the rest of the participants (Government 211, 2013).

Moreover, within this ‘performance-based funding’ structure or culture, subsidies can also be terminated to underperforming 5-100 Universities which “fail to demonstrate improved performance and planned growth in the world ranking within a two-year period” (Government 792, 201, p.104). It exemplifies how the discourses of ‘competition’ and ‘ranking’ intertwine with the managerial ~~‘NPM’~~ order of discourse. It also reveals one of the main features of this kind of initiatives which tend to award ‘excellence’ and fund accordingly those HEIs which are already advantaged in the ranking game (Rostan and Vaira, 2011; Brusoni *et al.*, 2014). Rostan and Vaira (2011) argue that Excellence Initiatives are likely to produce formal and informal hierarchies in national education systems through disregarding the HE system as a whole and targeting only individual HEIs which are already regarded as ‘elite institutions’ and which appear to be strong enough to compete globally. Inevitably, policies for excellence lead to a Matthew’s logic, that is to say, the strong get stronger and the weak get weaker (Rostan and Vaira, 2011).

Competitiveness in the global education market

In the late 2000s, the global financial and economic crisis urged the Russian government to reconsider its economic model, due to its being highly dependent on natural resources, and to turn its attention to a more sustainable ‘knowledge- and innovation-driven economy’ (Government 1662, 2008). The world crisis exacerbated ‘global competition’ between developed countries highly affected by the economic and financial crisis and developing countries, including China and India (which appear to be transforming into major locomotives of the world’s economic growth) and new emerging centres of economic development in Asia and Latin America (Government 1662, 2008).

The world crisis and the following growing ‘global competition’ have posed another challenge to Russia - the need to accelerate the economic growth and enhance its competitiveness to increase its economic and political weight in the world and secure its leading position in the region (Government 1662, 2008). This accelerated ‘economic competition’ has been accompanied by increasing ‘geopolitical competition’ for the control over ‘resources’ and

‘markets’. Indeed, the government highlights that the transformation of the world economic order opens up new opportunities for Russia’s global economic integration, strengthening and expanding its positions in the global markets to import new technologies and capital, as well as to export innovative products and educational services (Government 1662, 2008).

At the same time, the underdevelopment of new cutting-edge technologies can reduce the competitiveness of the Russian economy and increase its vulnerability in the growing geopolitical competition (Government 1662, 2008, p.4).

The discourse of ‘global competition’ is constructed not only based on the competition among economies, but also among education systems worldwide. The policy documents reinforce a certain discourse stressing that only innovative products and services will allow to compete effectively in the global markets, while “getting access to international markets is always like an acquisition of others’ territory” (Government 1662, 2008; Video 1, 2017).

Moreover, there is a strong relation between ‘competitiveness’ and various discourses of ‘education quality’ in the dataset: for example, one of the documents reveals that “the competitiveness enhancement of Russian education will be a criterion of its high quality, as well as will secure Russia’s positions as one of the leaders in exporting educational services” (Government 1662, 2008, p.45) in the global market. Thus, the concepts of ‘competition’, ‘competitiveness’, and ‘quality’ are intermingled and interconnected within the neoliberal order of discourse which implies that “increased competition represents improved quality within neoliberalism” (Olssen and Peters, 2005, p.326).

The ‘global identity’ of the Universities is essential for increasing ‘export of educational services’ which can be achieved by updating educational programmes and bringing them in line with the best international examples, by the production improvement of postgraduate activities, and by the implementation of joint educational programmes with leading international ~~and~~ Russian Universities and research organisations (Government 211, 2013; RAEI, 2018). Consequently, the 5-100 Universities attempt to integrate into the global education services market and increase their export of educational services:

There is a continuing decline in the global competitiveness of Russian universities, as well as decrease in Russia’s role as an exporter of education services. The decision to join the Bologna Process has become a breakthrough amid the isolation of the Russian higher education from the global talent market, knowledge, and technology (Government 792, 2013, p.72).

This citation exemplifies the recurrent discourses of ‘marketisation’ in Russian HE that emphasise the role of the Universities as the producers of ‘education services’ that the country can provide and export to the global education market. The discourses of ‘commodification of teaching’ and ‘commercialisation of education programmes’ also emerge in the analysed texts which are shaped and reinforced by repeated discourses of ‘export’, ‘exporter of education services’, ~~and~~ ‘internationalised curriculum’, ~~etc.~~

There is a particular stress on improving a postgraduate level at the 5-100 Universities and attracting top overseas students through joint Master’s and PhD programmes with leading international universities, since the concentration of ‘postgraduate students’ or ‘talent’ enhances world-class research and fosters innovation productivity.

On the other hand, it reflects a problem remaining in Russian HE, such as “low innovative activity of [Russian] universities and inadequate contribution of higher education to the development of the national economy in line with the innovation scenario” of knowledge-based economy (Government 792, 2013, p.72). Consequently, by expanding its

share in the global education services market, Russia seeks to transform the country into “the world’s leading study destination” (RAEI, 2018) and boost its world competitiveness in the global education market.

Competitiveness in the ‘research’ or ‘innovation’ market

Numerous initiatives for excellence tend to be constantly pressed for time and funding, and consequently they transform into an “intellectual challenge” set by a government or a president to the university administrations and academic staff to achieve “a big impact quickly”. Speaking about the thirteen 5-100 Universities which appeared in the THE ranking in 2015, Alexander Povalko (Former Deputy Minister of Education and Science) mentions:

This is probably the quickest progress among all the countries whose universities are ranked. [...] These most incredible results (which reveal the speed of their growth) have been demonstrated by the following universities: St. Petersburg Polytechnic, TPU and KFU [...] We [people related to the Project 5-100] realize that this result has been achieved thanks to things which can be done quickly. But the universities systemically invest into the development of their research bases, consistently strive to attract people, and, as a result, this initial rise ~~the~~ in ~~the~~ rankings is the product of tireless efforts of the administration, scientists and students of the university (News 5-100, 2015).

The textual analysis identifies that there is an emphasis on the performativity and efficiency in numerous texts of the dataset, in other words, this constant push from the government to achieve ‘the quickest progress’ and ‘incredible results’ ‘quickly’. Furthermore, there is a clear stress on improving and developing mainly STEM programmes in Russian universities, boosting basic and applied research, and strengthening science to modernise the HE system in Russia.

Thus, through fostering research activity and favouring a WCU model, the government seeks to modernise Russian HE and promote a vertically differentiated system, in other words, produce a hierarchy with Russian research-intensive universities at the pinnacle:

Another priority [of the State Education Policy till 2020] is a quality, quantity and territory optimisation of universities which will lead to the formation of clusters of universities targeting specified goals and missions, and achieving high quality of education. Among them, there is expected to be a group of world-class research universities which provide leadership in basic and applied research and integrate Russia into the system of knowledge and technology commercialisation (Government 792, 2013, p.76).

To rise and dominate in WURs, the government encourages the 5-100 Universities to modify their missions, identify their ‘priority areas’, and “integrate two university models, the research-intensive and entrepreneurial models of universities with strong departments of research and innovation commercialisation” (Video 2, 2017).

This research-oriented transformation of the 5-100 Universities has also been boosted by WUR movement, since “research and its traditional outputs is the primary and easiest measurement, acting as a proxy for excellence” (Hazelkorn, 2009, p.3). Consequently, the Universities transform or ‘rebrand’ their identities through the lens of WURs to marketise their strengths for competing in the research and innovation market, the technological services market, and in WURs.

Therefore, the discourse of ‘excellence’ in the Russian context is predominantly built on ‘research excellence’ discourses which draw on the interplay of the concepts ‘commodification of research’ and ‘marketisation’. In other words, highly market-oriented discourses reveal the nature of the universities behaving like real businesses competing to sell their products. For example, there are many discourses, such as ‘enhancement of research and innovation

productivity', the linkages and cooperation with 'business and industry', the 'commercialisation' of 'world-class intellectual products', where HE is represented as 'the academic sector' (RAEI, 2018).

Competitiveness in the global 'talent market'

Talent recruitment may be regarded as another shortcut to the top 100 WURs along the enhancement of research outputs. Commenting on the strategic objectives of the Project 5-100, Vladimir Knyagin (the CEO of the Centre for Strategic Research 'North-West') explains:

We [the people related to the Project 5-100] join the race for ideas, money, top professors, but also we join the competition for the most mobile, fast, intelligent, flexible, and capable of self-development people, for talents (Video 2, 2017).

It is important to examine how the discourses of 'research enhancement' overlap this concept of 'talent' and investigate what kind of talent might benefit most to universities' reputation and why it is highly valuable.

Talent attraction is considered as one of the strategic goals of the Project 5-100 which stresses the need for the "internationalisation in all spheres, development of infrastructure to recruit the best scientists, faculty, managers and students" (RAEI, 2018). In terms of the expected outcomes of the Russian initiative, the 5-100 Universities are also supposed to ensure at least 10 per cent of international faculty members and 15 per cent of overseas students in each University, apart from entering into the top 100 WURs (RAEI, 2018).

Although 'university managers' and 'international students' are evaluated within the concept of 'talent', the main emphasis of the Project 5-100 is on recruiting "the world's leading scientists to develop an outstanding academic reputation by doing breakthrough research" (RAEI, 2018). It also targets "more youthful faculty members and researchers with time spent and know-how gained in academic and research spheres, in leading international and Russian Universities and research organizations" (RAEI, 2018).

Within the dataset, internal and international 'academic mobility' programmes for faculty and researchers are considered as a means of bolstering internationalisation and talent recruitment in the form of internships, advanced training, professional retraining, and exchange programs, ~~etc.~~ Apart from boosting 'academic mobility' and developing the 'infrastructure' to attract talent, the 5-100 Universities seek to improve 'international recruitment outlook' and, generally speaking, 'global outlook' of Russian universities, since it is highly weighted in WURs. The overall number of international students is also regarded as an indicator of the world's recognition of the Russian professional education and the share in the global education market held by the Russian professional education (Government 792, 2013).

Thus, the recurrent discourse of 'competition' colonises numerous fields of HE, in particular the realm of HE internationalisation, which can be regarded as 'competition for talent' within a neoliberal paradigm or in more economic terms - competition for 'human resources' or 'human capital' in the 'global talent market'. One of the crucial aspects of this 'race for talent' is that it stresses the importance of attracting 'young talent', since "young people are the most important component of human resources in the country's economy" (Government 792, 2013, p.256).

Notably, HE can also be regarded as a major provider of 'human capital' which is essential for WCUs and a country's socio-economic growth and development. In other words, 'academic mobility' as global human capital flow is crucial for scientific discovery and "helps to form the long-run international linkages that foster innovation and

knowledge creation at the international level” (OECD, 2014, p.15).

Competitiveness in the ‘reputation’ market

CDA has revealed that the need for modernisation of Russian education may be justified by the government’s aspiration to gain wider recognition of its HE system among developed countries and drive up its ‘international prestige’ as a country’ in the global arena. From the government’s perspective, the discourse of the national education system ~~which~~ is commonly described as “a crucial factor for Russia’s positioning among the world’s leading countries, for its international prestige as a country possessing a high level of culture, science, and education” (Ministry of Education, 2001, p.264).

There are some discourses around the Russian HE system which signal that despite its “world recognition, obvious achievements as an education system” (Video 1, 2017), it has not been fully represented in the global education market. Thus, there is a certain emphasis on the country’s system-wide socio-economic crisis which happened in the 1990-s, hindered all the positive changes in HE, and resulted in Russia’s falling out of the global HE agenda (Ministry of Education, 2001).

Nowadays, the government strives to ‘maximise’ Russia’s visibility within the global research and education markets and ‘gain back’ its leading position in the world elite with the help of the Project 5-100 or better saying WURs (Video 1, 2017; RAEI, 2018).

The implementation of the set measures will allow at least five Russian universities to pave their way to the top 100 world university rankings by 2020 which will foster the restoration of dignified reputation of the Russian higher education system in the international arena, as well as will boost the attractiveness of leading Russian universities in the market of highly intellectual and elite academic workforce. Moreover, these measures will be a catalyst in the process of enhancing international competitiveness and attractiveness of Russian universities as a whole (Government 792, 2013, p.105).

This policy document reinforces the discourse of ‘rankings’ as a key indicator of ‘reputation’ and ‘carrier of excellence’ (Rostan and Vaira, 2011) in the global education market. Notably, by overarching the discourses of ‘dignified reputation’, ‘attractiveness’, ‘elite academic force’, the discourse of ‘rankings’ acquires indirectly an additional meaning, high ‘quality’ of the 5-100 Universities. This meaning of ‘quality’ is built up through ‘foreign academics, staff, and students’ who bring with them ‘prestige’ and the recognition of ‘global reputation’. Furthermore, it is possible to trace an intention to rationalise the position of the Russian HE system among the ‘world elite’ and its right to expand its share in the ‘global education market’ by stating that “our [Russian] education system has worldwide recognition and obvious achievements as a system” (Video 1, 2017).

Apart from being carriers of ‘reputation’ and ‘excellence’, WURs turn ~~out~~ to be a ‘proxy for competitiveness’ (Hazelkorn, 2014) and an indicator of a country’s ‘visibility’. For instance, the number of Russian universities in the world’s top-100 universities is represented as an indicator of the competitiveness of the Russian professional education and the development of the Centres of Excellence in Russia (Government 792, 2013).

Interestingly, WURs appear to measure not only a country’s academic reputation or research excellence, but also shed light on its standing in the world and reflect “a nation’s status in geopolitical terms” (Hazelkorn, 2015). Competing for their new positioning in the geopolitical system, many countries are likely to make use of WURs as a “soft power” (Hazelkorn, 2014).

Consequently, WURs happen to be an accelerator of the “reputation race” (Hazelkorn, 2015) in Russian HE which

leads to the commodification of academic reputation of universities in the global education market. For example, the 5-100 Universities “that combine a rich heritage and promising future” are portrayed as holders of Russian “famous scientific heritage” and “deep-rooted academic traditions” which can give them a crucial competitive advantage in the research market (THE, 2015). Due to WURs, this academic reputation can be easily identified and measured, in particular through analysing and evaluating various quantitative data in the form of research output and research-related activity (including citations, the number of researchers, academics, and postgraduate students, etc.).

The analysis also concludes that the Russian government seeks to gain both the internal legitimacy (in terms of fostering ‘economic growth’ and ‘modernising’ the Russian academia to ‘compete’ in the international arena) and global legitimacy (in form of boosting Russia’s ‘reputation’ and ‘attractiveness’ of the HE system abroad and improving its ‘leading position’ worldwide) to rationalise the implementation of the Project 5-100.

Conclusions and implications for policymakers

A number of scholars (Froumin and Lisutkin, 2015; Hazelkorn, 2009) conclude that initiatives and policies for excellence implemented worldwide reveal a common trend among many governments which intend to expand their control over HE systems and increase their role in shaping and modernising HEIs through introducing WURs to the HE-agenda.

CDA has identified that rationales behind the implementation of the Project 5-100 are predominately political and socio-economic which could be explained by the historical events entailing numerous social and economic issues in the country (e.g. the collapse of the Soviet Union and following the global economic and financial crisis in Russia in the late 2000s). Over the last two decades, the modernisation agenda of the Russian HE system has been inspired by the government’s aspiration to foster the transition to the knowledge-driven economy and accelerate a socio-economic growth. Rostan and Vaira (2011) suggest that WURs under policies for excellence tend to be used as powerful rhetoric devices to legitimise systems’ modernisation reform rather than as real instruments to improve systems’ and institutions’ performance. Furthermore, Excellence Initiatives happen to be a ‘legitimising argument’ to rationalise and steer the state finding to a small group of universities and as a result to reshape HE systems in terms of producing formalized vertical stratification or reproducing previous hierarchies in national HE (Rostan and Vaira, 2011).

The analytical framework designed to research ‘excellence’ in Russian HE has been drawn on the concept of ‘competitiveness’ which is essential from the government’s perspective for achieving global ‘excellence’. In other words, in the Russian context ‘excellence’ in HE may be interpreted as ‘competitiveness enhancement’.

Consequently, CDA discloses that the discourse of ‘excellence’ in Russian HE has been constructed and shaped through hybridising three dominant orders of discourse. Firstly, the ‘knowledge-based society’ order of discourse emphasises the importance of the 5-100 Universities through the discourse of ‘modernisation’ of Russian HE, through the promotion of a ‘research culture’ among other universities, and also through the production of ‘innovation’ for accelerating the transition to the knowledge-based economy. Secondly, the ‘marketisation’ order of discourse in HE become evident through the commodification of research and teaching produced by the 5-100 Universities to supply Russian intellectual production and educational programmes to the global innovation and education services markets. Thirdly, the ‘managerialism’ order of discourse emerge through the introduction of NPM techniques and discourses of performance-based funding in the 5-100 Universities to encourage greater competition among Russian universities and as a result to drive up quality improvement and competitiveness enhancement.

The findings reveal that the Russian government adopts a narrow understanding of ‘excellence’ which privileges

the research dimension over the teaching and learning activities, and emphasises it primarily as a tool to achieve Russia's aspirations for economic and social development rather than a target for enhancing and improving quality of research and teaching in the country's HEIs. From the government's perspective, 'excellence' is something which can emerge and get developed only through the metrics and performance indicators of WURs and through the tight control of a special council, various boards of trustees or educational managers, which limits even further the definition of this concept.

WURs have also proven to be 'a policy instrument' (Hazelkorn, 2014), in the form of guidelines for university transformation, benchmarks for progress evaluation, and tools for measuring universities' accountability and the outcomes of the Excellence Initiative implementation. Furthermore, the discourse of 'excellence' with its neoliberal nature appears to become very powerful and productive in Russian HE in terms of having impact on the government's funding decisions. Commenting on the prospective of the Project 5-100, the former Minister of Education and Science, Olga Vasilieva proposed "to select only up to four most effective universities and invest the rest of the subsidies into the development of these universities [...]. The other universities will report on the work performed and money spent" (TASS, 2017). It reflects the essence of 'excellence' revealed through awarding only high performing universities which contributes to inequality in the sector in terms of singling out the most 'effective' and 'efficient' HEIs for investment.

This study seeks to raise awareness of the discourse of 'excellence' in the realm of HE policy and question whether neoliberal forces in terms of free markets, competition, and NPM are the only premises to modernise education systems and nurture 'excellence' ~~in HE~~. In western democracies, the neoliberal culture of individualism and competition in HE, as well as the emphasis on managerialism and performativity within HEIs have already undermined the professionalism of teachers in the sense of transforming them into managed professionals who are required to operate efficiently and effectively within global educational markets (Olssen *et al.*, 2004). Consequently, it is essential to reconsider the extent to which tangible benefits to a country's HE system development are due to emphasising 'competitiveness enhancement' and 'quality assurance' instead of fostering, for example, 'teaching excellence' along the social democratic lines, 'quality improvement' or 'academic freedom and autonomy'. Since the Project 5-100 is still under way, the findings of this study may encourage education researchers and policymakers to investigate the transformation of the 5-100 Universities' identities and analyse the outcomes of the Excellence Initiative.

Notes

1. The two Russian universities, Lomonosov's Moscow State University and Saint Petersburg State University, which have a special status and funded separately from other Russian HEIs, have already entered WURs and are not participating in the Project 5-100.
2. 'Proyekt Povysheniya Konkurentosposobnosti Vedushchikh Rossiyskikh Univesritetov Sredi Vedushchikh Mirovykh Nauchno-Obrazovatel'nykh Tsentrov'

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