

**RRI 2016**  
**International Conference «Responsible Research and Innovation»**

**COMMODIFICATION OF KNOWLEDGE IN SYSTEM OF  
HIGHER EDUCATION**

Natalia Pankova (a), Marina Khaldeeva (a)\*

\* Corresponding author

(a) Tomsk Polytechnic University, 30, Lenin Avenue, Tomsk, Russia, [mngvtk@tpu.ru](mailto:mngvtk@tpu.ru)

**Abstract**

This article touches upon the issue of the process of commodification of knowledge in the context of higher education system in Russia. The relevance of the research is first determined by the processes of Russian universities transformation into world-class universities in order to improve their positions in global university rankings, and, secondly, by the need for modification of the translation of scientific paradigm foundations and new knowledge acquisition through the means of commodification. Among various educational practices in the era of globalization, developing countries including Russia are implementing diverse representations of transnational collaboration in the field of education. For this reason, the process of commodification of knowledge may be also considered as one of the direction of the Russian educational system towards integration into global educational environment. The purpose of this research is to define the peculiarities of the concept of commodification of knowledge in the system of higher education and to analyze the main strategies of Russian universities reformation.

© 2017 Published by Future Academy [www.FutureAcademy.org.uk](http://www.FutureAcademy.org.uk)

**Keywords:** Higher education, commodification of knowledge, world-class university, university, universities ranking.

## 1. Introduction

At the end of the XX century, when Russia refused from further formation of socialist reality and returned to capitalist relations and market economy, the studies examining consumer behavior became particularly relevant. This issue is investigated not only by economists, but also psychologists, sociologists and other specialists, traditionally studying human relations from the perspective of an immaterial reality. The issues of these studies also affect an educational process, since knowledge in contemporary reality is now treated as a commodity, and an educational process is treated as a service, but it has not ceased to be a necessity.

The term of an "educational service" was introduced in 1998 with the adoption of education program modernization, and in 2002, this concept started to be used in legal documents.



This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 Unported License, permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Need is consciously or unconsciously conditions for ensuring human life or the need with certain conditions of life, activities, material objects, people or certain social factors, without which an individual is experiencing discomfort. In this case, the consumption may be understood as the use of positive characteristics of goods that reflect a human desire to satisfy his needs. From this point of view, the process of consumption is represented as a set of economic relations between an individual and his desired object as well as between other people.

## **2. Methods**

In the course of the research, the authors applied such methods as: the monitoring method of educational strategies in Russian universities, the systems analysis method of the evaluation of Russian higher education, and the method of focused qualitative and quantitative analysis of the experience of Russian and international universities. As a result of this research, the advantages and disadvantages of main strategies of universities transformation in terms of commodification are analyzed with the help of the experience of Russian and international universities. Corresponding solutions are then recommended with the reference to aforementioned frameworks of current practices.

## **3. Results**

### **3.1. Prerequisites for Commodification**

The process of consumption has not only functional meaning that implies the use of useful properties and qualities of an object, but also a symbolic meaning when the desired object presents a marker of the status of a person and his affiliation to a particular social group. For example, mobile users may be roughly divided into two "camps" - fans of Apple products and users of the Android system (in fact, all the others).

The educational supermarket offers a readymade assortment of services and goods for the "consuming" personality, an array that has been created and decided on by someone.

In the modern world, the process of higher education acquires all the characteristics of the process of consumption (Karpov, 2013). It may be estimated from the same positions. On the one hand, every person needs to get new knowledge for self-improvement as an individual (Maffie, 1999). Learning skills contributes to the formation of a person as an expert. Communication in the process of education is an integral part of socialization.

On the other hand, values are more often presented not by knowledge and skills obtained in the process of education, but by a diploma of a particular educational institution, which is an assurance for the further employment of the graduates. Moreover, every layer of society starts to form its own stable system of preferences that determines the form of consumption or habitus. Accordingly, a service (as a commodity) is endowed with a certain value and becomes a symbol of a certain lifestyle and social attitudes (Pankova, et al. 2016). A commodity or a service obtains its marking value that sets it apart from other goods and services (Knight, 2006). Thus, along with consumer's value and price, the so called symbolic cost is being formed, and a commodity or a service begins to be determined by a consumer with due regard to its symbolic characteristics.

Modern universities widely use such kind of symbolic meaning in relation to the process of education. Great attention is paid to the formation of a positive image of a university in the info sphere and the creation of a household name (Karpova et al., 2015). This can be illustrated by the example of Tomsk Polytechnic University, which seeks to promote its positions in global rankings of universities and aspires to become a world-class university. Great attention is paid to the increase of the publication activity of the university staff and students in top-rated journals, the organization of international scientific events with the participation of world-class scientists, the implementation of high demand academic programs and creation a favourable image of the university in order to attract foreign students and academic staff (Ardashkin et al., 2015).

According to Jean Baudrillard (1998), the manipulation of people's consciousness arousing human desire to fulfil their needs is not realistic. Consumer society is hyper real, Baudrillard writes. When the goal (education or purchase of any goods) becomes symbolic, there is a sign of alienation from the object that it represents. The sign becomes a simulacrum, a copy of an object substituting the real thing and existing independently. Thus, the world of a person consists of not real events or objects, but of simulacra, and the boundaries between material and symbolic reality blur.

This leads to the increase of commodification, which is implemented in the social sphere (Sharp, 2000), and also affects the education system. Commodification is one of the key processes typical for Western market economies. The term is used to describe the process when to something, which does not have an economic value, is assigned a value, and, hence, how market values can replace other social values. It describes a modification of relationships, formerly untainted by commerce, into commercial relationships.

For that reason, nowadays the process of commodification of education is a phenomenon which is highly emphasized by global academic circles. However, the search of the relative universal definition of this phenomenon in appropriate modern research is not crowned with success.

### **3.2. Manifestation of Commodification**

In this article, the authors are trying to explore the issue of how commodification of scientific knowledge is enacted. Investigating the realization of commodification, it is possible to name several main points characterizing the phenomenon. The first regards commodification: it is important to distinguish commodification from commercialization although the two processes are currently not distinguished in academic discourse and are closely related in practice. The commodification of knowledge is here defined as the process when knowledge is reduced to a format that makes it possible to make an exclusive package for which an exchange value may be established. This implies that the process of commodification also presupposes or is dependent on commercialization.

For more thorough understanding of the difference between «commodification» and «commercialization», the following example is provided: University «A» has a number of further education courses which it offers to companies for a price. These courses are taught by a regular faculty and all course materials, etc. are non-exclusive and freely available to students and other members of faculty. University «B» also has further education courses, but these courses are sold as a package which comes together with specially designed course materials which are the registered property of the university. Faculty members and students are forbidden to distribute or use such materials outside of the

specific context of the course. University «A» may be said to have commercialized its further education program whereas university «B» has commodified its further education program. University «B» has achieved this by making the course an obligatory point of passage for accessing the teaching materials for both students and teachers. Through the registration of the course material as the property of the university, University «B» has managed to appropriate the knowledge involved in this course (Merle, 2003).

For example, Tomsk Polytechnic University offers a number of commercial short-term educational programs of professional development, which have an exclusive learning and teaching package and which are taught by academic staff of various departments: Management and business economics (marketing, psychology of management, human resources management and so on), information technologies (computer graphic, AutoCad operation, Web design and so on), environmental management (labour protection, protection in case of emergency, fire safety and so on) etc.

The second and third points to be made in this article are that the commodification of knowledge may be seen as part of a broader social process in modern world, in which more and more things are moved into the market sphere, and as a tool which society is employing to make science more accountable (Petrova et al, 2015). In the two last perspectives, it is argued that the commodification of knowledge and the role that researchers play in this process are complex (Lipinski, 1999). The most important and signifying characteristic of this is that knowledge is simultaneously a gift and a commodity while researchers are both victims and promoters.

Despite the fact that there is much discussion about the commodification of knowledge but little literature is available that defines what this means in the context of scientific knowledge. A common-sense definition of commodification would be the transformation of relationships, formerly untainted by commerce, into commercial relationships, relationships of buying and selling. In his seminal work, *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard referred to the changes he had observed under the conditions surrounding the production of knowledge in the following way: «*The relationship of the suppliers and users of knowledge to the knowledge they supply and use is now tending, and will increasingly tend, to assume the form already taken by the relationship of commodity producers and consumers to the commodities they produce and consume – that is, the form of value*» (Lyotard, 1991).

In relation to transnational educational practices, it is necessary to note that the process of commodification of education and knowledge now may be seen as one of the tools of internationalisation of education or integration into global educational environment (Ziguras, & McBurnie, 2015). At the same time in many developing countries, the development of transnational higher education plays the role of one of the leading revenue generators. As a result, exclusive educational packages of transnational academic programs are treated as commodities and the profit of these commodities disposal presents one of the major economy divisions of a country (Feldman, 2000). The commodification of knowledge is manifested through the implementation of transnational joint programs or double-degree programs, established as a result of international cooperation. This cooperation is characterized by profit-driven motives of universities and their desire to promote their brand to an international level (Ziguras, & McBurnie, 2011). It may be established between universities of different countries and categories, for example, between top universities and lower ranked institutions. Highly reputed universities may play the

role of providers of educational services and sell their academic programs as commodities to overseas students.

Cross-border flows in higher education have evolved through diverse forms, providers, disciplines, curriculums and fee types in response to varied consumption needs in educational services. Initially, demands for educational services exceed the domestic institutions' capacity, leading more students to choose to study abroad as evidenced with cases of Singapore and Hong Kong in the 1980s, or Vietnam and China in the early 2000s (Vallely, & Wilkinson, 2008).

The modes of commodified transnational joint programs may be roughly divided into three groups according to people mobility (students who study abroad), program mobility (franchise, double degree, virtual distance, joint programs) and provider mobility (branch campuses, independent institutions, study centres). Among transnational joint degree programs existing in TPU, it is necessary to name MSc programs initiated by TPU together with the Petroleum learning centre, Heriot-Watt Approved Learning Partner. After the graduation of such program, students have diplomas of both Heriot-Watt University and Tomsk Polytechnic University.

Tomsk Polytechnic University (TPU) has a great successful experience in implementation of such programs due to the fact that TPU joint programs are taught by the highly reputed staff and are made up in accordance with all the qualification requirements of a specific profession and do not miss a humanitarian component contributing to the formation of a person. Nowadays, TPU is one of the major Russian educational exporters. Tomsk Polytechnic University has been actively promoting its international cooperation since 1991. During these years, TPU managed to enlarge the share of international students and make a good profit out of their education. In addition, with the help of transnational partnership, TPU trained highly-qualified specialists and strengthened its brand as a world-class university and a respected research centre.

At the moment, more than 5000 of students from 50 countries are studying at Tomsk Polytechnic University. The main international partners of Tomsk Polytechnic University in the field of joint programs implementation are Technical University of Munich (Germany), Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (Germany), Fraunhofer-Institute (Germany), Technical University Wien (Austria), Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich (Switzerland), University of Texas (USA), San Diego State University (USA), The Technion – Israel Institute of Technology (Israel), Heriot-Watt University (GB), University of Southampton (GB), Newcastle university (GB), Paris Saclay University (France), Grenoble Polytechnic Institute (France), Czech Technical University, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (Norway), the National Institute for Nuclear Physics (Italy), Jilin University (China), the Indian Institutes of Technology (India), Ulsan University (Korea) etc.

Thus, it is evident that the promotion of transnational higher education as a tradable commodity is an inevitable result of the globalization process, but it is vital to take into consideration that the development of this type of education should be sustainably beneficial on the condition of relevance, equity and quality. Due to this fact, universities aspiring to establish transnational collaboration in education and to make a profit are tend to choose the universities which have high positions in global rankings and significant results in scientific breakthroughs as their partners. The right choice of the partner contributes to the promotion of a university brand. The higher the reputation of a university and the presentability of the university diploma, the higher the amount of student buying its educational services, and accordingly

the higher the revenue collected as the result of education provision. For developing countries, transnational educational collaboration provides not only access to world-class education systems but also an enhancement of the opportunity for human resources and economic development. If transnational collaboration is seen as a market where universities function as producers of a special commodity competing in price and brand exposure, then it has benefited stakeholders in different ways. Offshoring education brings revenues and an expansion of the opportunities for service providers, especially when they are suffering from funding government reductions.

The process of commodification is becoming a powerful active force. We are focused on the process of consumption, but not on satisfaction of our needs. More and more people are divided according to what they consume, and the very process of consumption becomes the value. This fact in its turn leads to the dependence of human on the process of consumption. This dependence was formed in the modern society. We are governed by means of marketing tools that regulate the demand and purchasing power of consumers.

This dependence is also reflected in the educational process. Universities are captured by quantitative indexes, defining their place in global university rankings. The basis for criteria of compliance is formed by three directions of activity, which supplement each other – talent's' concentration and orientation to creative search; research necessary resources, which contribute to formation of the favorable environment for education; and revolutionary profit-generating scientific break-through and a flexible structure of university management which contributes to the initiation and implementation of innovative approaches.

#### **4. Conclusions**

To conclude, we would like to note that all the changes concerning the system of education should be of strategic nature. Great importance currently attached to global rankings, indicators of success and demand, does not comply with all the spheres of University life. Trying to build a recognisable brand of a university, one should remember that focused attention on research and publication activity could have a negative impact on the educational process, the quality of teaching, which is difficult to measure with quantitative methods. To the same extent, it is necessary to understand that the increase in the amount of commodified educational services may lead to the decrease in the quality of proposed academic packages due to the fact that many universities tend to exceed the number of courses and students allowed for an intake, without taking into consideration the fact that that short-term benefits and revenues can affect the sustainable and fruitful development of the educational services industry and transnational collaboration in higher education (Godymchuk et al., 2015). Many educational programs concentrate only on ready market demands such as marketing, management and computer programming. They are sacrificing graduates' benefits by being poorly adapted to the social, cultural and economic context and by undermining their employability and future study options for the convenience of service providers.

“The contribution of education to economic life is an important subject, and an interesting subject, and it can actually be investigated empirically. But it is only one aspect of education, not the entirety, and it does not deserve the overwhelming emphasis which it now enjoys. Reading modern political speeches and official reports and then setting them alongside those of twenty five, let alone fifty or a hundred, years ago is a revelation. Contemporary writers may pay a sentence or two of lip-service to other objectives of education before passing on to their real concern with economic growth. Our recent

forebears, living in noticeably poorer times, were occupied above all with the cultural, moral and intellectual purposes of education” (Wolf, 2002).

The practice shows that the demand for quick results is not conducive to the development of innovative and long-term studies. The increase in the number of publications leads to the deterioration of their quality, levelling the value and significance of the research results. Creativity and love towards knowledge, the aspiration of self-improvement should not be measured in a money equivalent; moreover, the prevalence of pragmatic trends at a university inevitably leads to a crisis of creative thinking.

The researchers note that “the rush that often surrounds the world-class universities largely surpasses the real need and the opportunity of many countries to make real profit from such elite education and advanced research, at least in the nearest future”.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to express our gratitude to many people who helped to bring this research project to fruition. First, we would like to thank Professor Alla A. Kornienko for improving the earlier version of this article. We are deeply grateful for her help, professionalism and valuable guidance.

We would also like to thank Tomsk Polytechnic University for organizing the International Conference «Responsible research and innovation».

## References

- Ardashkin, I. (2015). Philosophy of Education as a Social Development Factor: World Trends and Prospects for Russia. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 166, 277-286.
- Baudrillard, J. (1998). *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, Sage, London, England, 208.
- Feldman, M.P. (2000). Where Science Comes to Life: university bioscience, commercial spin-offs and regional economic development. *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: research and practice*, 2, 345-361.
- Godymchuk, A. et al (2015). Public and Scientific Community Attitudes towards Nanotechnology Applications. *Innovation Management and Sustainable Economic Competitive Advantage: from Regional Development to Global Growth. I*, (VI), 2466-2476.
- Karpov, A. (2013). The commodification of education. *Russian education and society*. 55 (5).75-90.
- Karpova, A., Ardashkin, I., & Kabanova, N. (2015). Organizational culture in focus of measurements. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 166, 246-253.
- Knight, J. (2006). Higher Education Crossing Borders: A Guide to the Implications of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) for Cross-border Education, *Commonwealth of Learning*, 19-41.
- Lipinski, T. A. (1999). The Commodification of Information and the Extension of Proprietary Rights into the Public Domain: recent legal (case and other) developments in the United States. *Journal of Business Ethics*. 22(1), 63-80.
- Lyotard, J-F. (1991). *The Postmodern Condition: a report on knowledge*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Maffie, J. (1999). Epistemology in the Face of Strong Sociology of Knowledge. *History of the Human Sciences*. 12(4), 21-40.
- Merle, J. (2003). Rethinking Science and Commodifying Knowledge. *Policy Futures in Education*, 1(1), 125-142.
- Pankova, N., Kabanova N., Kornienko, A., & Ponomarev, V. (2016). University as a Sociocultural Phenomenon: the Past and the Present. *European Proceedings of Social and Behavioural Sciences*. 7, 279-284.
- Petrova, G.I., Brylina, I., & Kulizhskaya, E. (2015). Corporate Culture of Contemporary Research University in Search of Complementarity of Humanitarian and Commercial Principles in Education (Russian Context), *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*. 166, 505-510.
- Sharp, L.A. (2000). The Commodification of the Body and Its Parts. *Annual Review of Anthropology*. 29, 287-328.
- Valley, T. J., & Wilkinson, B. (2008). *Vietnamese Higher Education: Crisis and Response*. Massachusetts: ASH Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation.
- Wolf, A. (2002). *Does Education Matter? Myths about education and economic growth*. London: Penguin
- Ziguras, C., & McBurnie, G. (2011). Transnational Higher Education in the Asia-Pacific Region: From Distance Education to the Branch Campus. *Higher Education in the Asia-Pacific: Strategic Responses to Globalization*, 36, 105-122.
- Ziguras, C., & McBurnie, G. (2015). *Governing Cross-border Higher Education (Internationalization in Higher Education Series)*, USA. New York: Routledge.