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**QUALITY DRIVEN BY EXCELLENCE PROJECTS: WHAT CAN A BULGARIAN UNIVERSITY LEARN FROM A RUSSIAN BENEFICIARY OF PROJECT 5-100?**

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**Abstract:** As a result of an outgoing mobility funded by the Erasmus+ program Key Action 107 for partner countries, staff members of Medical University – Plovdiv, Bulgaria bring back impressions of many successful practices adopted by Tomsk State University, Russia. Undoubtedly, some of the most impressive such practices have to do with *Project 5-100*. In the present article we offer a brief review of this governmental project, and examine the ramifications for Russian universities in general and for Tomsk State University in particular. We argue that it is thanks both to the desire to become a beneficiary of the project and to the benefits stemming from becoming such a beneficiary that Tomsk State University has dramatically improved the quality of the education that it offers to its students. We identify several key areas of discernible quality enhancement: a greater diversity of the majors offered, more joint master’s degrees, augmented internationalization of the student body. All this is clearly evidenced by the overall improved rating of the university: from Rank QS Word 551+ in 2013 to Word 227 in 2018. We conclude that even though at present the Bulgarian government does not fund a project of close resemblance to the Russian *Project 5-100*, a Bulgarian university such as Medical University – Plovdiv can surely learn from the experience of Tomsk State University. In particular, we can find inspiration in the quality improvement of the Russian university, which could not only serve as preparation for future projects, but is also valuable in its own right.

**Keywords:** academic excellence, internationalization, *Project 5-100*

**1. INTRODUCTION**

At the heart of the Erasmus+ program lies the belief in the importance of learning from other people’s experience, of sharing experience among people and institutions from different countries. Thus, having completed an outgoing mobility at Tomsk State University, staff members of Medical University – Plovdiv are eager to share some of their most striking impressions of the many successful practices that the Bulgarian party witnessed at the Russian university, namely the ones having to do with *Project 5-100*. We believe that not only our university, but any Bulgarian university or any other university in the European Union, can learn from the quality improvement achieved by the Russian university in connection with this governmental project.

**2. PROJECT 5-100**

In 2013, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation initiated *Project 5-100* in order to “maximize the competitive position of a group of leading Russian universities in the global research and education market”<sup>1</sup>. The project name reflects the goal set up by the Russian president Vladimir Putin on May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2012 of having at least 5 Russian universities among the top 100 universities in the world by the year 2020<sup>2</sup>. To offer financial support for this ambitious goal, the President sanctioned substantial state scientific funding (up to 25 billion rubles by 2018<sup>3</sup>).

**3. TOMSK STATE UNIVERSITY: THEN AND NOW**

In order to be selected for participation in *Project 5-100*, Tomsk State University (TSU) had to boost its overall academic quality. Once among the project beneficiaries, TSU did not lose the momentum gained in the attempt to become a beneficiary: instead of letting the momentum die, the university continued to accelerate its development.

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation. *Russian Academic Excellence Project 5-100*, <https://www.Stop100.ru/en/universities/> (last visited on 2 Nov 2018), pp. 1, (2012).

<sup>2</sup> Путин, Владимир. Указ №599 Президента Российской Федерации от 7 мая 2012 года: О мерах по реализации государственной политики в области образования и науки, <https://5stop100.ru/en/documents/regulations/74085/> (last visited on 2 Nov 2018), pp. 1, (2012).

<sup>3</sup> Путин, Владимир. Указ №599 Президента Российской Федерации от 7 мая 2012 года: О мерах по реализации государственной политики в области образования и науки, <https://5stop100.ru/en/documents/regulations/74085/> (last visited on 2 Nov 2018), pp. 1, (2012).

There are several key areas of discernible quality enhancement: a greater diversity of the majors offered, more joint master's degrees, augmented internationalization of the student body. All this is clearly evidenced by the overall improved rating of the university: from QS World University Rankings 551+ in 2013 (2013-2014)<sup>4</sup> to QS WUR 277 in 2018 (2018-2019)<sup>5</sup>.

The university constantly improves its educational offer. Each year TSU deliberately increases the number of educational programs that it offers at the master's level while focusing specifically on online courses, distance learning, and degrees offered in languages other than Russian<sup>6</sup>. Thanks to this increase and emphasis on such courses, TSU paves the way for excellence in another area: the university is successful in expanding and diversifying its international student body.

A visible area of great success is the increase and diversification of international students attracted by Russian universities. Following the launch of *Project 5-100*, the number of international students in 2015 represented an almost twofold increase in comparison to the one in 2012<sup>7</sup>. This general tendency holds true for TSU as well: in 2013, international students comprised 10.8% of the student body; in 2017, that percentage increased up to 18<sup>8</sup>. The rating for international diversity has improved from Rank 454 with a score of 40 pts. (Copper League) in 2014<sup>9</sup> to Rank 281 with a score of 61 pts. (Silver League) in 2018<sup>10</sup>.

The number of joint master's and PhD programs has also escalated. The increase is, indeed, dramatic: from 3 in 2014 to 50 in 2017<sup>11</sup>. TSU currently offers 7 English-taught programs, which include the first English-taught Master's program in Biophotonics in Russia<sup>12</sup>. TSU prides itself on relentlessly expanding its academic opportunities: for instance, in the last but one academic year, it started offering 6 new Master's programs<sup>13</sup>. Thus recognition of its dedication to academic excellence and internationalization comes as no surprise: TSU has 24 academic programs on the list of the Best Academic Programs of the Innovative Russia; the university is also a recipient of the *Prize for Internationalization of Higher Education* in the *Internationalization of Academic Programs* category<sup>14</sup>.

In a way, getting a university ready to participate in *Project 5-100* can be seen as a *constructive paradox*: the more the university strives for excellence in order to get financing from *Project 5-100*, the more recognition and non-*Project 5-100* financing it gets for its excellence. Let us look back at one of the above examples: a significant and diverse international student body is beneficial for academic excellence; offering foreign-language taught courses is good for improving academic excellence both directly **and** (by increasing the number of students from abroad) indirectly. Hence academic excellence is key for obtaining *Project 5-100* funding, but, in turn, receiving *Project 5-100* funding helps boost academic excellence.

<sup>4</sup> QS World University Rankings. *University Rankings 2013*, <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2013> (last visited on 1 Nov 2018), pp. 1, (2013).

<sup>5</sup> QS World University Rankings. *University Rankings 2019*, <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2019> (last visited on 1 Nov 2018), pp. 1, (2018).

<sup>6</sup> Томский государственный университет. *Более 100 образовательных программ: магистратура*. Томск, Томский государственный университет, (2016).

<sup>7</sup> The Pie News. *Russia: Project 5-100 doubles foreign students*, <https://thepienews.com/news/russia-project-5-100-doubles-foreign-students/> (last visited on 1 Nov 2018), pp. 1, (2015).

<sup>8</sup> Tomsk State University. *TSU 2020: Intellectus apertus mundo*, [http://www.tsu.ru/upload/iblock/TSU\\_presentation\\_RUS.pdf](http://www.tsu.ru/upload/iblock/TSU_presentation_RUS.pdf) (last visited on 1 Nov 2018), pp. 2, (2017).

<sup>9</sup> Round University Ranking. *Tomsk State University: 2014*, <http://roundranking.com/universities/tomsk-state-university.html?sort=O&year=2018&subject=SO> (last visited on 1 Nov 2018), pp. 1, (2014).

<sup>10</sup> Round University Ranking. *Tomsk State University: 2018*, <http://roundranking.com/universities/tomsk-state-university.html?sort=O&year=2018&subject=SO> (last visited on 1 Nov 2018), pp. 1, (2018).

<sup>11</sup> Tomsk State University. *TSU 2020: Intellectus apertus mundo*, [http://www.tsu.ru/upload/iblock/TSU\\_presentation\\_RUS.pdf](http://www.tsu.ru/upload/iblock/TSU_presentation_RUS.pdf) (last visited on 1 Nov 2018), pp. 2, (2017).

<sup>12</sup> Томский государственный университет. *Национальный исследовательский Томский государственный университет – декабрь 2017*. Томск, Томский государственный университет, pp. 44, (2017).

<sup>13</sup> Tomsk State University. *National Research Tomsk State University*. Томск, Томский государственный университет, pp. 23, (2018).

<sup>14</sup> Tomsk State University. *National Research Tomsk State University*. Томск, Томский государственный университет, pp. 22, (2018).

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**4. TOMSK STATE UNIVERSITY: A TRULY EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY**

One of the important requirements for participation in *Project 5-100* is the creation of a university development plan, a *roadmap*, that includes target-areas for development such as diversity of educational programs, joint master's degrees, and internationalization of the student body. TSU defended its latest roadmap, *Roadmap for 2018-2020*, in front of the International Project Council, headed by Olga Golodets, Deputy Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, in October of 2017. TSU's plans for growth and their defense were so remarkable that the university was approved to receive maximum funding for the 2018-2020 period. The defense also marked the inclusion of TSU among the *Project 5-100* leading universities, known as the "locomotive" (the *motor*) of the whole educational system in Russia. A key reason for this success appears to be TSU's belief that "it is not universities that compete, but the ecosystems created by them. That is, how a university can build a relationship between business and the academic environment and make the process of producing innovations basic for the university"<sup>15</sup>.

Such a belief is instrumental for the European Union as a whole, and Bulgaria in particular. The European Commission sees establishing cooperation between universities and business as helping "higher education institutions (HEIs) develop curricula and approaches to learning that meet the needs of both students and society"<sup>16</sup>. In 2016, Miglena Kuneva, Vice Premier Minister and Minister of Education and Science of Republic of Bulgaria, states that only in the context of cooperation between scientific, educational, and business institutions can students' efforts be fruitful<sup>17</sup>.

**5. CONCLUSION**

Even though at present the Bulgarian government does not fund a project of close resemblance to the Russian *Project 5-100*, a Bulgarian university such as Medical University – Plovdiv can surely learn from the experience of Tomsk State University. In particular, we can find inspiration in the quality improvement of the Russian university: it can surely serve as preparation for future projects, and it is also valuable in its own right. In addition, preparing a clear, challenging, yet realistic and achievable roadmap seems to be an obvious departure point for any university wishing to boost its academic excellence.

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<sup>16</sup> European Commission. *Education and Training*, [https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/innovation-in-education/university-business-cooperation\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/innovation-in-education/university-business-cooperation_en) (last visited on 1 Nov 2018), pp. 1, (2018).

<sup>17</sup> Министерство на образованието и науката на Република България. *Вицепремиерът Кунева: Усеща се нуждата от мениджъри до ректорите*, <https://www.mon.bg/bg/news/1649> (last visited on 2 Nov 2018), pp. 1, (2016).

