

Going World-class Through Merger: How the State Affects Identity Formation in Russian Flagship Universities

University mergers are a widespread tool for transformation of higher education systems all over the world. It is indeed a global phenomenon — in the last two decades, Australia, South Africa, the United Kingdom, Norway, China and many other countries reported the potential for or accomplished university mergers. In Russia university mergers are relatively new phenomenon. However they already have deeply changed the whole higher education landscape and become the basis for new types of higher education institutions. One of the most intriguing type of universities introduced primarily by means of mergers is the so called “world-class” (or “elite”, “first-class”, “flagship”) university. Though the term “world-class university” may be considered something of a buzzword and leaves a lot room for speculation, because “everyone wants one, no one knows what it is, and no one knows how to get one” (Altbach 2004), Russia in many respects followed China to establish world-class universities through mergers. In China it was the initiatives Project 211 and Project 985 that encouraged universities to merge in order to receive additional funding from the government. According to some scholars’ estimations, $\frac{3}{4}$ of top Chinese universities are post-merger universities (Cai 2010). In Russia, 9 Federal Universities were established through mergers of existing higher education institutions in order to hit university rankings and become among the top 100 in the world in 2020. Along with some other designated universities which have received special privileges and status, Federal Universities “will become world-class higher education centers, integrating education, research and innovation” (the Ministry of Education and Science 2009).

These transformations would be impossible without the pressure and considerable financial and political support of the State. It is widely recognized that in the case of Russia, the State, not universities themselves, played a crucial role in the promotion of the idea of cultivating world-class universities through mergers and further accelerated development of post-merger institutions (Carnoy et al. in press). But still we know very little about the role of the State in the process of identity formation in post-merger universities. In the paper we will try to focus our attention on the following questions: first, what meanings are embedded in the idea of a world-class university from the State point of view? Second, how are post-merger universities trying to incorporate the idea of becoming world-class into their self-definitions, programs, and policies to meet the State’s expectations? And third, how does a post-merger situation affect a university’s progress toward acquiring the desired new identity of being world-class?

We rely on organizational identity concept to explain complicated interactions between the State and post-merger “world-class” universities in Russia. Albert and Whetten in their seminal paper “Organizational identity” emphasize three criteria for organizational identity definition: the criterion of claimed central character, the criterion of claimed distinctiveness, the criterion of claimed temporal continuity (Albert and Whetten 1985). In other words organizational identity it is that which is central, distinctive and enduring about an organization. Some researchers claim that the audience of organization is a crucial element for organizational identity’ development and change, especially when events occur that challenge or threaten and organization’s definitions and interpretations of identity (Ginzel et al. 1993; Elsbach and Kramer 1996). But very few studies address the issue of how organizational identity is developing in a situation when previous identities have failed and new identity (imposed by the most powerful part of the audience) is far from being established and acquired.

Due to the lack of systematic data on the mergers in Russia, the research is based on comparative case-studies of 4 (out of 9 in total) post-merger Federal Universities (the Arctic FU, Ural FU, Kazan FU and Far East FU). The data have been collected through a series of in-depth interviews with university professors and administrators (from 15 to 29 in each university), surveys of professors and students (so far conducted at Far East FU only) along with the study of documents pertaining to merger process. The grounded theory techniques (Strauss and Corbin 1990) were utilized to analyze qualitative data. The survey methodology was based on the Competing Values Framework (Cameron and Freeman 1991, Harrison and Stokes 1990).

The study has revealed some important and counterintuitive findings about the influence of the State on the identity of post-merger flagship universities in Russia. First, it confirmed, that the State is by no means the most powerful actor in the universities’ environment. On the other hand the State is sending somewhat ambivalent messages about the nature of being world-class, in terms of the scope of activity, the content of educational programs, directions for research and innovation. Second, post-merger universities develop different mechanisms to incorporate those messages and incentives from the State. They use cooptation and decoupling strategies, develop specific boundary-spanning units and actively attract the State affiliated consultants to legitimate their programs and policies. The composition of those mechanisms varies depending on pre-merger situation. Third, the most evident clash and conflict was found not between pre-merger universities’ identities, but between the old identity of regional university (shared by the merged universities) and the new identity of world-class institution imposed by the State. The latter is associated in most cases not with the high quality of teaching, research and innovation, but with accountability, bureaucracy and “ministerial” culture.

The questions raised by the study are relevant for better understanding of the identity formation in the post-merger university settings, especially in the situation of forced merger which are starting to occur more often in different parts of the world.