

Russian Black Sheep or Is It? Case Study of a Russian Private University.(0080)

Full Proposal

Introduction

Higher education system in Russian Federation has been undergoing rapid enrolment expansion and growing numbers of HEIs (Morgan and Kulikova, 2007; Scott, 2009). Governments have encouraged this growth from a belief that a more highly educated citizenry is necessary for national economic development. Rapid system growth has put considerable downward pressure on educational quality both as students' intake is drawn from broader range of academic ability and, in some cases, as instructional staff have to be hired faster than they can be adequately trained. On the other hand, higher education systems are undergoing dramatic transformations in response to the challenges of market economies, competitiveness and open societies. Educators and governments alike have been advocating for higher education systems based around the principles of merit-based access, international integration, support for the disabled, raising achievement levels and development of research (Scott, 2009). The two trends combined represent a considerable challenge for higher education in the region. Universities need to educate more students, while improving the quality of their educational experience at the same time. In most cases the changes take place under tight resource constraints.

This picture is further complicated by increasing diversity of higher education institutions. There has been a clear trend of increasing numbers of private HEI since the break down of the Soviet Union. Many private institutions, although initially an anomaly in a state dominated system, are finding their way through complicated web of governmental regulations, contradictory expectations of accreditation mechanisms (Suspitsin and Suspitsyna, 2007), newly developing market ideologies and global challenges of the 21st century. Limited literature exists on Russian private higher education (e.g. Suspitsin and Suspitsyna, 2007). Largely such literature describes struggles and barriers that universities have to overcome to assure their survival and prove their substantive value to the external environment. It may also be somewhat outdated, as Russian higher education is an extremely rapidly changing environment and at least some pioneering institutions are learning to thrive despite all limitations. The goal of the present study is to present findings of a case study of a private successful HEI. Applying a model of entrepreneurial university, I seek to understand how the institution in question assures its existence, how it balances conflicting priorities, meets its strategic goals, constructs its recruitment policies and manages its academic staff and seeks opportunities for continuing development.

Theoretical Framework

In English language literature, the idea of entrepreneurial university was originally described by Clark (1998). Clark's intention was to point the way for traditional institutions existing under tight regulations and heavily dependent on public money. Shattock (2008) developed the concept further by pointing to a variety of elements that form entrepreneurial university. He defines entrepreneurialism as not simply as resource generation, but as an ability to generate activities which may have to be funded in innovative ways in response to market needs, driven by individual energy and imagination. It includes institutional adaptiveness to a changing environment as well as the capacity to produce innovation through research and new ideas (Shattock, 2008).

This definition implies ability of the institution to encourage the key producers—academic staff—to take risks, try new ideas, experiment in research and teaching as well as developing links with the community. It also implies applying innovating methods of faculty management that are aligned with the risk taking nature of the proposed enterprise (Shattock, 2008).

Method and data analysis

This study relies on a case study method to gather data about a single private HEI in Russian Federation. The institution I studied is located in the European part of Russia in a non-capital region. Its main campus is home to around 1,500 students shared between traditional and long distance (zaochnyi) forms of study. It employs 76 members of academic staff and relies on services of around 500 part-time academics who are hired to teach individual courses.

Data were collected through interviews with 25 academic staff (5 of which had administrative duties at various levels) and 4 top level administrators. Interviews followed a semi-structured format to allow for comparability of responses but also give respondents opportunities to explore issues of interest to them. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. Interviews were analyzed to identify themes, trends, sources of tensions and incongruence among various elements.

Findings and Conclusions

Preliminary data analysis presents an interesting picture of a young (20 years) and yet well recognized, dynamic institution with high degree of entrepreneurial spirit. Around 90% of institutional revenue is generated from student fees. In a system dominated by state sponsored HEIs this figure is indicative of institution's independence from the state. The rest of the revenue is generated through research and service projects often sponsored by the local governmental competitive grants.

The institution puts high premium on incorporating leading information technologies in the process of teaching and learning. This includes individual websites for all members of staff, which are used for dissemination of self-developed copy righted materials, electronic sources recommended for individual study, communicating course expectations, posting exams. Other

technological advances include long distance lecturing assisted by Adobe products, communication with students via email and chats (methods atypical for traditional Russian HEIs).

The institution is involved in a number of innovative projects that assist regional community development. One such project aims to supply basic computer literacy training to general public by establishing special training centers accessible and affordable for targeted audience.

Although research was mentioned as one of the strategic priorities by several respondents with administrative duties, more than half of academic staff admitted to not being research active. Research activity does not determine employment security in this institution and no sanction mechanisms exist for non-active members of staff. Equally, data reveal that little tangible support is in-built for research active faculty. There is a system of internal research grants, but not all faculty are aware of it. A few who have applied reported inefficiencies in the way the system works. More importantly, research activities are not rewarded by any time breaks from teaching duties (which are extremely high, around 720 hours a year) and are performed at the expense of individuals' private time.

In conclusion, the institution I studied exhibits many features of an entrepreneurial university described by Clark (1998) and Shattock(2009). However, rapid development of entrepreneurial spirit not limited by historically existing culture may lead to overlooking of critical academic functions of HEI. Further analysis and findings will be reported in the full version of the paper.

Bibliography

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