

Transforming Core Processes in Russian Research Universities: Formats, Concepts and the Loose Couplings (0338)

Andrey Shcherbenok

Moscow School of Management SKOLKOVO, Russia

What faculty and students do at the university, both in classrooms and laboratories, is only to a certain degree governed by the administrative core, including national legislation, institutional regulations, organizational structure, KPI and the like. One can hardly disagree with Christine Musselin (Musselin 2006) that teaching and research are activities difficult to describe and therefore difficult to prescribe. Loose coupling (Weick 1976) between administrative core and internalized norms that for the most part govern these activities limits the extent to which administrators can transform the way teaching and research are conducted at the university.

This poses a special challenge for a university top-down transformation in general, and systemic transformation of higher education systems in particular (El-Khawas, 1998, Enders, Boer, Weyer, 2013, Krucken, 2014). Many countries that have successfully transformed their higher education systems – such as South Korea and Hong Kong – did so by mass recruitment of faculty who had received their PhDs outside their national educational systems. These people underwent their professionalization through the direct immersion in institutional practice where different norms were already firmly established and could be acquired through supervision and imitation. However, in countries like Russia, which cannot import university organizations wholesale with both organizational structure and people to fill it, universities have to change the way that faculty they already have teach and do research.

Over the past decade or so, Russian Ministry of Education and Science has run several nation-wide programs that aimed at transforming the nation's top research universities. Although these programs provided substantial increase in state funding to participating institutions and paid for the acquisition of state-of-the-art laboratory equipment, their influence on the actual teaching and research was quite modest. The demanded changes were largely done "on paper" – in other words, the reforms changed the administrative core and reporting routine, but not the actual teaching and research processes.

The Ministry as well as change-oriented university rectors therefore came to the conclusion that since providing more resources and demanding formal indicators in exchange does not work as expected and mostly lead to the imitation of change, it is important to involve a substantial portion of university leaders at different levels in executive education programs that would inspire them to think about their institutions' long-term strategy and change their received ideas about university education and research processes. This approach does not eliminate the fundamental difficulty of strategic transformation of a loosely coupled organization that the university is, but it opens new possibilities and raises interesting problems.

In this paper, I will use my experience of working with several Russian research universities from Baltic Federal University on the Baltic Sea to Far Eastern Federal University on the Pacific Ocean to discuss the possibilities of using executive education to change the core processes.

Both formats of this education – multi-module integrated programs at SKOLKOVO business school for university leaders on the one hand and series of strategy sessions in the universities on the other hand – involved intense intersubjective processes and moved participants outside their comfort zones and habitual professional discourses. This practice demonstrated that whereas some participants were firmly rooted in one or another of organizational subcultures and its set of professional norms, others were situated at the junction of several subcultures. Instead of a coherent system of norms, beliefs and values,

which could hardly be changed without replacing their bearers, these participants possessed a number of contradictory sets of norms of action, which were actualized depending on the situation.

While being situated at the intersection of subcultures may be a predicament of a postmodern subject in general (Hatch 1997), in Russian universities, due to their particular historical circumstances, the contrast between coexisting subcultures, ambiguity of meaning, and precariousness of professional norms seems to be considerably greater than in more stable university systems. For the past 25 years, Russian universities have existed in the ruins of the Soviet system of higher education amidst social and economic turmoil that destabilized academic professions. For this reason, Russian universities may illuminate certain potentialities of executive education due to the higher malleability of their subjects. In this paper, I will argue that there are three main avenues that have to be travelled simultaneously if the core processes are to be affected.

Firstly, there is a level of organizational rationality – educational formats, institutional structures, etc. This is the level that most university reforms aim at in the first place, albeit with very limited effectiveness as far as influencing the core processes is concerned. However, it remains important to give the transformation a palpable organizational shape in order for it to take hold.

Secondly, there is the conceptual level – ideas, notions and theories pertaining to education and research. It is important, however, that the new ideas are not simply forced on the university leaders replacing those they already entertain, but rather emerge as a response to the crisis of existing conceptual framework, which, therefore, has to be actualized in advance in a process that we refer to as “problematization”.

Important as they are, these two avenues by themselves do not solve the problem of reforming a loosely coupled organization. It is perfectly possible – and often observable – that what a university employee consciously believes is the right thing to do and what the organizational arrangements prompt them to do, has little bearing on the actual practice, just because theoretical concepts and formal arrangements are loosely coupled with core processes in question. For this reason, it is important to use the avenue implied in the theory of loose coupling – namely, the possibility of rearranging the pattern of loose and tight couplings in a given organization (Weick, 1982, Trondal, 2015). I will conclude my paper with some examples illustrating how such strategic rearrangements can make structural and conceptual redesign effective means of reforming university teaching and research without replacing majority of the faculty or attempting to radically convert a university into a tightly coupled corporation.

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