The Process of Merging Universities as One of the Key Tools to Improve Their Competitiveness and Strengthen the Rating Positions in the Global Market of Educational Services

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Abstract: Article is devoted to the issues related to the influence of the processes of reorganization by merger of universities to develop their educational and research activities, namely improving the competitiveness of the world's scientific and educational centers. As an example there is the experience of University of Nizhni Novgorod as the actor of these processes in the region.

Key words: Merger of universities • Enhancing competitiveness ranking • The global educational space • The leading research and education centers

INTRODUCTION

Development of society organized on knowledge produces strong pressure on universities. They are unique because they are the only ones who are responsible for higher education and research activity. Modernization of education motivates universities to setting multiple tasks and development of new ways of their solution and implementation. Universities play leading part in society in training the youth and improvement of research competences of specialists and in forming of new knowledge on the basis of modern researches. In conditions of total globalization higher education institutions must become highly competitive and innovative scientific and educational center of world priority. The key indicator is world ranking of universities and scientific and educational centers.

Historically 2 main tasks of any university are as follows: creation of new knowledge and training of highly qualified specialists for national economy. The triangle also includes innovations and entrepreneurship [1]. New knowledge and well trained specialists will facilitate social “Renaissance”.

The period of reforms in our economy demands effective development of innovative component of Russian higher education system and increase of its competitiveness in world market of educational services. Rankings allow universities to understand that they need to be taken in the field of quality management education to improve their performance. However, increasing the values of the indicators does not mean a real improvement of quality of universities. To assess the quality of higher education institutions it is necessary to take into account not only scientific and academic performance, but possibly and the quality of the education [2].

Side by side with changes in contents we need organizational and structural transformations in the system of training of specialists as well as search for new forms and methods on every stage of work – pre-university, undergraduate, post-graduate.

New paradigm of higher education which is characterized by the following features: education must be accessible from any point of the world; all-life-through education; education without leaving work. The achievement of this is possible only in cluster environment.

Trends of professional education demand more perfect ways of regulation of educational services market. Existing structure and quality of professional education contradict to the objectives of social and economic development both of separate regions and the whole country. Indirect reasons of actualization of issue of quality of professional education are as follows: innovative wave, de-centralization of management, commercialization of education, its regionalization and...
democratization (apart from positive impact on education in general) also lead to negative consequences – worsened quality of training.

Modern trends in development of global market of educational services are: constant increase in competitiveness, first of all, between national educational systems. Therefore sustainability of Russian universities in their competition with West-European “colleagues” will stand for the future of all Russian economy and entrepreneurship. Therefore models of sustainable development of universities must be developed which will provide growth in innovative entrepreneurship in conditions of increased international regional competition.

Sustainable development of any university as it is with any other social and economic system is connected with constant renewal of its activity and search for new more effective management and technical solutions, implementation of innovations into learning process and administrative and management practice.

It is obvious that sustainable development depends on a number of factors connected both with external and internal environment of management object. For example sustainable development of any university is subject to external (micro-macro environment) and internal factors (resource potential). Finding most important factors of external environment which are able to influence sustainability of a university and adequate reaction to their activity will lead not only to stable position of a university in the market (in rankings) but in the same time will show the trajectory of its future development determined by attractors of changes in external environment.

University should consider the rankings and the evaluation criteria as tools for mapping, plan measures to improve its performance and reputation of the promotion, forming partnerships with the best universities, investing in strategic goals and encouraging staff to achieve them. An important consideration is the balance between the position in the ranking as a significant component of the image of the university and politics, principles and culture of the university and more broadly, public policy and these academic standards and the solution of social problems and participation in community life, etc [3].

University as a social institution must not only develop and bring up personality of a student but do social good in the same time - the society must be provided with professional specialists which can satisfy demands of this society. But there is no rules of assessment and analysis of the market's needs. Main task of any university is to attract students, provide educational services, after that students must think about their career themselves.

But the point is not market economy which has problems with employment of specialists but rather the attitude to understanding of this problem. As a result we have the following situation: university 'ranking is defined taking into consideration services provided by university to the society, specialties demanded by society, prestigiousness of any university.

The major components of the innovative economy like new scientific knowledge, high technologies and highly-qualified specialists became the subject of special attention from all the authorities responsible for the economic development of the country. Competitive advantages, innovation studies and effectiveness are the key components of today’s economy and state policy [4].

Important trend in the sphere of education is that our universities start working on their rankings: they evaluate the level of competitiveness on the market and increased demand for some specialties.

That is the reason by which university needs educational ranking badly. But we must admit that this ranking must not be illusive - it should be natural, corresponding to the essence of things.

Effective behavior of any university in the market today must be such that it will guarantee increase in its services' competitiveness by means of maximal correspondence of their parameters to market demand. With further improvement of social and economic position of Russia in the world and market “popularity” of its education the most important thing will be not relative significance of price and quality of service - the first place will be given to position of this higher education institute in rankings.

Higher education institutions which gain more and more characteristics of entrepreneurial structures in their struggle for end consumer also face the problem of complex approach to ranking forming. The rankings are based on value component therefore this process is an integral part of the corporate culture management process. And these two processes must be integrated in one.

System of higher professional education must be reformed. But by now information about how this reformation will be performed brings more questions than answers. It is obvious that successful university must be extended (form its branches) and non-effective ones be optimized. And in this situation leading Nizhni Novgorod institutes can feel themselves confident. Universities
influence development of economy through the prism of their intellect. Today we observe changes in universities’ influence on the community: they are cluster of technologies which must be transferred and in such a way we shall be able to influence business. On federal level it was decided to give money for creation of infrastructure which will influence volume and scale of production in a good way. Universities are locomotive of development of scientific thought in industry and economy in general. That is why even being reformed our university will keep leading positions. Economic development is first of all development of industries fed by personnel trained at our university. Selecting which university is appropriate you must pay attention to economic situation in the country and the world and future trends. The state wants to some extent to concentrate higher education system around leading universities and there exists a criterion of assessment: the number of institutes and universities must be such that state and society will be able to keep them on the level which guarantee output of good specialists and development of science and innovations [5].

In 2011-2012 Arzamass Polytechnical college, Dzerzhinsk Institute of higher qualification, Arzamass pedagogical college and Nizhni Novgorod commercial institute merged with LSUNN. All of them are different in status and profile. LSUNN has a program of secondary professional education and after merger with Arzamass college this program can be elevated on a new level. Arzamass college is not located in Nizhni Novgorod and formally can be only a branch. Rector of LSUNN E. Chuprunov said that “it will consist of pedagogical institute, polytechnic college and that part of students and teachers which previously studied in Arzamass branch of LSUNN. This will be not just a branch, one more university campus will appear in Arzamass”. There will be little changes in educational process, the same faculties, chairs and secondary professional education program will remain with the branch as well as its own post-graduate course. We shall have an unique opportunity to develop in isolation, inside university, a pedagogical line of education. As far as NNCI is concerned the situation here is a bit more complicated - it demands more preparation. We are not able to organize a branch in the same city where our university is situated that is why we are planning to transform NNCI into management and entrepreneurship faculty. Every institute is a huge amount of students and teachers. It means that the main task set forth by our state - economy - is not achieved. You ask what is purpose of this process? Initially economy will be minimal - only at the expense of reduction of management costs. But we keep in mind that key responsibility of any institute is training of quality specialists and with merger this task can be fulfilled in a better way. Newcomers have access to all resources - libraries, laboratories, computers and advanced equipment, will have opportunity to participate in contests and win grants, do research work. Merger will provide competitive advantages for enlarged university in the market - and this is especially important in terms of international competetiveness: after merger the institutes stops to compete with each other and join their forces to resist external competitors [6].

Merger and quality transformation (enlargement) of LSUNN will allow:

- To provide new quality level in specialists, scientists and teachers’ training;
- To decrease costs for training of specialists, costs for research and implementation into production of know-hows;
- To provide common use of unique equipment for the purposes of learning process;
- To spend more rationally funds of the university, merged institutions and enterprises;
- To increase effectiveness of research work by means of cooperation between university scientists and specialists of merged institutions;
- To make LSUNN center of rising stabilization of regional economy, the center of scientific and technical culture of production, cultural development and attraction of all creative forces joined together in the region;
- To create new structure of regional professional education in the form of scientific-innovative cluster which will provide better quality of education, improvement and diversity of the work on continuous professional education and professional orientation of schoolchildren, young men and students;
- To provide integration and multi-levelness of educational programs to train qualified specialists able to satisfy demands of the economy of the region;
- To give an urge to further increase in scientific and research and educational potential;
- To enhance ranking positions of the university in the region as the biggest and one of the leading scientific and research centers of Russia.
In the same time competitiveness of higher education in the world depends on fundamental training, extent of engagement of students into research work as well as ability of final-year students to adapt themselves quickly to changing demands of labor market. Engagement of students into research work is necessary element of training process and in the same time an effective way of passing through early stages of innovative cycle and creating of scientific and technical base [7].

New status of LSUNN is the status of integrator of knowledge. It will become leading participant and intermediary in integration of educational and scientific structures with production, culture institutions, governmental bodies. This integration is aimed for solution of inter-disciplinary tasks of education and science as well as implementation of innovative activity.

The analysis of the interaction of executive and legislative authorities, universities, business structures and enterprises, research centers and growth zones in the context of the establishment of a regional research and innovation cluster has shown that its implementation is aimed at solving current tasks of creation in the Russian Federation of a network of specialized innovation clusters for complex solution of the issues of economy modernization [8].

Activity of modern enlarged LSUNN covers all elements of triangle of knowledge (education, research and innovations). Interconnected development in these spheres will produce synergy effect which will enable to increase many times the degree of development of every component of knowledge triangle in comparison with their independent development. Probed methods of innovations are the content of educational programs and specialists trained in the framework of such programs will solve tasks both of industrial transfer of innovations and of generation further knowledge needed for continuous development of technologies in specific sphere.

In modern conditions, the ability of the country to benefit from the global economy based on knowledge, not only depends on its ability to absorb process and generate new knowledge, but also on the ability to transfer this knowledge to others, which confirms the feasibility of establishing a scientific and innovative cluster based on strong institutions [9].

Idea to merge universities produces a lot of fears - first of all among those of scientific community, rectors and students. They believe that it will result in loss of academic schools of Russia, reduction of budget places for students and transition of the university to republic financing - it means that they will get no more support from state budget. But there are other opinions: people think there are real reasons for this merger, they are as follows:

- Opportunity to use synergy from joint operations: vertical or horizontal integration leads to better coordination in use mutually additive highly specialized asserts on different stages of educational process (vertical integration), economies of scale (horizontal integration);
- In the result of diversification of sources of financing we get finance synergy - more stable financial position of the university, we can expect grants from government; integrated institutions can effectively use financial and operational levers for better application of integral resources (asserts);
- Institutions’ merger can lead to over-distributions of ineffective “capital” when ineffective institute will close inadequate programs and use more effective programs developed by the university;
- Over-distribution of resources between main participators of merger followed by better management;

With all that strategically the aim of merger remains single for all: to create competitive form to be used in Russian and world system of education.

The activities of regional clusters will allow for the coordination both on the federal and regional and local levels of adoption of policies in order to create conditions for the development of economic sectors and social sphere and the formation of clusters of advanced economic growth with respect to the competitive advantages of each region. It is the steady increase in the quality of life of the country that should be an indicator of the success of the implementation of state regional policy [10].

We can conclude that enlargement of higher education institutions was caused not only by worsened demographic situation in Russia but reaction to new trends in world education system. Enlarged institutions thanks to integrated potential become stronger - both because of better staff and infrastructure/financial opportunities and will have more chances for effective participation in global competition. Direct effects of enlargement are good positions of merged institutions in world rankings (the example of this - Urals Federal University named after the first President of Russia B. Yeltsin, established on the base of Urals state technical university, UPI named after B. Yeltsin and Urals state university named after M. Gorky which has improved its ranking positions in QS ranking for 100 points at once).
REFERENCES


