Higher Education Mergers in Russia:

A case study of national merger policies

Anna Nikolaeva

Master of Philosophy in Higher Education

UNIVERSITETET I OSLO

June 2020

Abstract

Mergers of higher education institutions have become an essential part of higher education policies of the last 15 years in a lot of countries around the globe. They have also provoked a lot of debates among policy-makers, higher education stakeholders and public due to their nature, rationale, adoption procedures and possible outcomes. The research literature on mergers in higher education is rich in case studies of mergers in the USA, Europe and Asia. Sometimes this research is of a comparative character and discusses similarities and difficulties of approaches to mergers, their introduction and outcomes. Yet there is very little research on mergers in Russia which has experienced a great number of mergers in the last 10 years.

The current study examines mergers in Russian higher education from the point of view of national higher education reforms. It is aimed at identifying merger rationale with the help of national policies and finding out if merger motivations in Russian higher education are different from those of other countries. In order to get the better understanding of approaches to mergers, this study uses the theory of Christensen et al. of instrumental and institutional perspectives.

Results of the data analysis show that Russia has taken a unique path in rationalizing the introduction of mergers. The two waves of mergers in Russian higher education differ drastically in scope and can be characterized by different motivations: if the first wave of mergers was induced by the state and was aimed at reducing the number of ineffective institutions and then improving quality teaching and research; the second wave of mergers was voluntary and was aimed at creating strong universities in Russian regions which would provide the regions with all kinds of social and economic benefits.

Acknowledgements

Being an ordinary English instructor at university, never have I imagined studying higher education policies at a national level. Never before I started my studies at University of Oslo, have I taken interest in organizational studies. Thank you to all the professors who shared their knowledge in this area and inspired me to explore this topic.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Bjørn Stensaker for guiding me throughout my whole work on this thesis. It is for your supervision, your valuable advice, recommendations and comments that I was able to complete this thesis. Thank you for your support and for not giving up on me.

I would also like to thank Russian government funding program *Global Education Program* for making this opportunity come true and for being my financial support.

Thank you to Marina Gvozdeva, Vice-Rector for International Affairs of Petrozavodsk State University and my former English instructor for giving me the idea of studying abroad and helping me navigate in Russian higher education reforms.

Last but certainly not least I would like to thank my mother, Nina Nikolaeva. Thank you for showing by your own example how to overcome challenges of life. I owe it all to you.

Table of contents

1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction and background

Higher education as an institute has different history in different countries. Such a variety can be explained through a great number of factors: different courses of national history; different economical and cultural development of countries; different traditions of state governance; different political ideology and its shifts in time – to name a few of them. Different political, economical and cultural events in different countries played significant role in the history of higher education development and provoked educational systems of many countries to reorganize themselves time and again. One of most significant reorganizations of the latest history of higher education came after the Bologna Declaration of 1999 which among many other key-decisions stated the need for the majority of the European countries to develop compatible educational programs and degrees. It is obvious to suggest that the implementation of the Declaration has had controversial consequences, and it would be fair to say that after almost 20 years after the Declaration has been signed, higher education systems of many European countries are still not fully compatible. The differences in higher education systems were not easy to narrow down due to various factors, one of them being the bottom-heavy nature of universities which makes it a challenging task to impose the external change. Besides that, it goes without saying that any kind of organizational change entails additional financial and human resources. On the top of that, system of higher education is not fully independent but interrelated with both economics and politics, thus in most cases the reforms of higher education are tied to the overall reforms of public sector.

Nevertheless while analyzing reforms of higher education systems in different countries it is possible to identify common trends and directions that these reforms take. First of all, higher education systems in most countries faced rapidly growing student numbers. More and more students with various backgrounds nowadays gain access to higher education which entails expansion and development of the system. Furthermore, there is an emphasis on cooperation between higher education and industry since graduates are often challenged by the fact that their professional skills don't coincide with employers' demands. At the same time, there is a focus on the importance of educational technology. As technology continues to change our lives and the world we live in, higher education is called upon to integrate technology into education in order to improve education in national contexts as well as to facilitate international higher education. International cooperation of a given university serves as an important criterion for students when they are choosing their prospective study place. Internationalization is important not only in the

context of a given university, but also in the broad international education context. National governments of different countries are developing strategies for internationalization of their higher education systems to help improve its position in the global educational market and make universities more attractive for international students. The students' educational choices are not only driven by recognition of higher education system on the international level but also by a given university's reputation. Being a very controversial issue themselves, university rankings create reputation competition of world's top university and a desire of improving the position there.

In order to address the current demands to higher education systems in general and to separate universities, there have been various solutions found. In countries, where higher education system is a part of public sector, such solutions are of a federal character and are usually introduced in form of laws, policies, decrees, etc. Since 1980s higher education institutional mergers have become an essential component of policy frameworks and change drivers of higher education landscape around the globe. The term "merger" itself came to the area of higher education from the world of economics and can be largely defined as the emergence of a new entity out of the two (or more) entities which existed before. While the general definition reflects the nature of the process both for private and public sectors, the key motives behind mergers can be different. For instance, private sector mergers serve as an instrument of controlling and eliminating competition, whereas mergers in public sector (including higher education) are often applied as means of increasing efficiency. At the same time, higher education nowadays is often spoken about as a market so it is reasonable that it adopts some of market features.

The first records of higher education mergers can be found in 1930s in North America but it was not until 1970s when their occurrence became systematic. According to Millett (1976), at the beginning of 1970s there was a 75/25 enrollment distribution between public and independent American institutions. Such disproportion was seen as an indication of possible financial difficulties in the independent sector. Furthermore, the studies of enrolment size of that time showed that a considerable number of independent colleges had enrolments of only around 1000 students, and the size of an institution was assumed to be one of the reasons for financial distress. Thus, in order to improve the existing situation, there were organized merges between colleges of the independent sector to provide strong counterpart to the public sector.

About at the same time European higher education faced systematic difficulties which demanded organizational change. For example, in 1960s it became clear that British traditional universities could not handle the societal need for professional training (Kyvik, 2004). In order to address this issue, the government initiated mergers of small specialized institutions which

made it possible to establish polytechnics which served as an alternative educational sector. Not only did mergers help create new educational programs, but they also made it possible to improve standards and achieve economies of scale. Many other European countries have established binary educational systems with the same intentions: the alternative sector made higher education more accessible at the time when it faced massification; it helped meet the demands of labour markets and improve regional economies. Therefore national governments of Belgium, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Finland, the Netherlands, etc. used mergers to organize larger multipurpose colleges since they were able to offer a broader scope of educational programs and be more efficient (Kyvik, 2004).

A decade later, on the other side of the globe, the Australian higher education has experienced a great number of mergers. Those were induced by the Federal Government in 1981-83 as an attempt to reduce costs and address the issue of decreasing enrollments both in some fields of study and some institutions (Harman, 1986). Later on, at the end of 1980s the reforms of Australian higher education were aimed at creation of a unified national system of higher education. The main purpose of those reforms was to strengthen the role of higher education in economic development and making institutions more responsive to societal and environmental needs. The desired unity of the system was achieved by mergers between universities and colleges which used to be separate sectors with separate missions. Thus the main intention behind the creation of the united national system in Australia was to have a smaller number of bigger institutions with broader profiles (Gamage, 1992).

Asia has not become an exception, and since 1990s mergers have come to the forefront of higher education reforms in China. Historically, Chinese higher educational institutions received their funding from various sources. Such funding model has led universities not only to compete for resources, but also to function independently from each other. As a result, Chinese universities and colleges in the same geographical area provided duplicate educational programs. As a solution to those organizational and management problems the State Council and the State Educational Commission demanded individual universities and colleges in the same area to merge into one institution (Huang & Zhang, 2000). Such measures were anticipated to improve educational quality, boost institutional efficiency and distribute educational resources in a more productive way.

The existing research on higher education identifies mergers as a global trend and analyzes structural, financial and cultural effects of mergers over a period of time. According to the literature, mergers may help increase efficiency and effectiveness; deal with problems of institutional fragmentation and non-viable institutions; improve student access and greater differentiation in course offerings to cater for more diverse student populations; increase

government control over the direction of higher education systems in order to ensure that the institutions serve national and regional economic objectives; etc. (Harman and Harman, 2003) Thus we might conclude that there is a range of problems that mergers may be a solution to. Does this mean that mergers can solve the same problems in different countries? Or it is political, economical and cultural context that shapes higher education problems which mergers can solve? The current study is aimed at addressing mergers as solutions to higher education problems in Russia – a country whose higher education reforms are rarely discussed on the international level. Studying the rationale behind Russian mergers will extend our knowledge of mergers and contribute to the global merger rationale. The topic is of significance to policy makers, social scientists, institutional managers and society at large.

1.2 Research questions

The study aims to investigate a complex issue of higher education mergers in a specific country. The key focus can be summarized in a core problem statement: What are the higher education problems that national government intends to address when it opts for mergers as a solution? In order to investigate this problem statement the following research questions will be applied:

1.   Are there particular policy problems to which mergers are attached?
2.   What is the status of mergers as a policy solution compared to other policy instruments?

2 Theoretical considerations

2.1 Merger rationale in research literature

Over the last decades mergers in higher education have become not only a hot topic to discuss but an essential part of higher education policies in a great number of countries. Literature on mergers stresses that merger as a process entails significant changes in forms and course of governance, institutional objectives, academic programs, various organizational procedures, etc. Furthermore, it takes a considerable amount of resources, both human and financial, to strategically plan and implement mergers. When costs are this high but higher education systems still turn to mergers, there comes a question: why merge?

It would be fair to suggest that institutions merge in order to receive some kind of gain. Skodvin (1999) suggests that administrative, economic and academic benefits serve as the most

frequent rationales behind mergers. The larger size of an institution is thought to be beneficial both administratively and academically. Administratively mergers may help achieve economies of scale (with respect to the number of administrators) and make administration more professional and efficient. Academic intentions of mergers include elimination of duplicative programs and improving academic integration and collaboration (e.g. by means of creating multi- and interdisciplinary fields). Moreover, mergers between institutions with different academic profiles help diversify profile of a new unit and strengthen its position on national and international levels.

According to Rocha et al. (2018), larger institutions are thought to have more potential to address challenges of competitiveness, research quality and international reputation. Their study of main motivations behind higher education mergers in a number of countries identifies cost efficiency; economies of scale and scope; reputation influence as most frequent merger rationale. Furthermore, the study provides for main categories of merger motivations. For instance, the decision to merge might be imposed by economic gains. These are such merger motivations as cost reduction, increasing efficiency, saving financial and human resources, overcoming financial challenges and other survival reasons. Another category is enhancement of higher education institution's position. Institutions may merge in order to increase their competitiveness on regional, national and international levels or strengthen the position in relation to stakeholders (e.g. public authorities or funding organizations). Mergers can also take place due to quality improvement considerations. The main motivations then are strengthening the quality of teaching and research and elimination of low-quality programs. The last category of merger rationale is system consolidation. Merger processes may be organized as a reaction to demographic declines or as a means of overcoming fragmentation and duplication of study programs.

Van der Wende (2014) focuses on a different dimension of merger rationale and identifies factors which serve as merger drivers. These are global competition and the desire to reach the certain level of prestige created by global rankings; national strategies for diversification and excellence; and changing level of investment in higher education and research budgets. Under these pressures higher education institutions change in terms of breadth (to expand the scope of teaching programs and research fields) and size (to achieve efficiencies of scale and to enhance market share).

While discussing merger motives and drivers, some researches provide more nuanced classifications than the others, but they recognize that the decision to merge can stem from either from higher education institutions themselves or from government and administration. Thus research literature on mergers divide mergers on voluntary and involuntary. As it is clear from

their name, voluntary mergers happen when higher education institutions initiate merger process themselves. Voluntary mergers are believed to be easier to organize and implement and are thought to be more successful (as opposed to forced mergers) due to greater staff involvement in planning and implementation (Harman & Harman, 2003). Though voluntary mergers may have their own drivers, most of them are still urged by cost efficiency, optimizing scale of operation and brand leverage (Goedegebuure, 2012). It can also be noted that most of rationale for voluntary mergers can be found either in national higher education policies (such as striving for multi-disciplinarity and enhanced quality, the need to address increased access and differentiation issues, and focus on research) or institutional strategies (establishing new programs, gaining strategic advantage in region, achieving critical mass, etc.).

Involuntary (forced) mergers take place in response to external pressures which usually come from governments. In order to stimulate mergers, governments define national goals to which higher education institutions are expected to contribute. Even when governments do not impose mergers directly, they may impose particular features or configurations which universities may find hard to avoid implementing. University steering is then organized by various performance-based funding arrangements which evaluate institution's contribution to the national strategic plans. However, recent research shows that when mergers are policy-motivated, reorganization is driven not by efforts to set the system in order, but to achieve a certain level of prestige and create world-class universities (Goedegebuure, 2012).

Goedegebuure (2012) defines policy-induced mergers as policy responses to identified deficiencies in existing higher education systems that need larger institutions to manage particular challenges. In Australia, for instance, mergers reflected government's intent to increase participation and create stronger competition. In Norway mergers were seen as a means of creating a stronger college sector which could act as a viable non-fragmented counterpart to the university sector through more autonomy due to more professional institutional management. In the Netherlands mergers also affected non-university sector and followed a planned shift in the overall coordination of higher education system. In China the main motivations behind mergers were decentralization, growth and increased competition. In Hungary mergers reflected the adoption of more market-oriented forms of governance. It is evident, that governments are reorganizing their higher education systems and use mergers as an instrument to introduce them at the international markets where they could compete for students, staff and prestige. It is also evident, that governments tend to use mergers as an ultimate solution to various national problems. Can this widespread use of mergers be possibly explained as a higher education trend? It can be suggested that higher education institutions of a certain country merge because there are bigger universities created in other countries. This idea finds its support within the institutional

theory (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) which focuses on the impact of environment on organizations. According to this theory, organizations operating in a certain organizational field will tend to become more similar. In other words, they implement actions and strategies of the institutions that are considered to be successful and thus start sharing their organizational characteristics.

As we can see, there is a great body of higher education research that addresses mergers and motivations behind them. As a general rule, the researchers provide classifications of merger rationale organized by a certain criteria. For instance, Skodvin (1999) focuses on the kind of benefits which could be achieved by mergers, while Rocha et al. (2018) and van der Wende (2014) investigate pressures and challenges of the modern higher education sector and mergers as means of addressing them. However, despite different perspectives in studying mergers, these authors do not contradict each other and often identify the same merger motivations even though the classifications might be different. Indeed, all the mentioned authors agree that higher education institutions merge in order to obtain economies of scale, improve educational quality and enhance program diversification. Moreover, they all discuss the matter of reputation and admit that mergers may help universities strengthen their position on the international level, hence investigating the other side of merger processes in different countries – is it "fashionable" to organize mergers because other countries do so?

As we can see, most of the research is based on case-studies of individual countries and summarizing them helps us form a broader picture of mergers. Furthermore, some of the research is of a comparative character and analyzes mergers, their rationale and their adoption in different countries. However, there is very little research on mergers in Russia and consequently, there is no research comparing Russian higher education mergers with mergers in other countries. Thus current study presents significance not only as a case-study of mergers in an understudied country but also as a possible source of information for future studies of educational reforms in various higher education systems.

2.2 Empirical context of mergers in Russia

Following the discussion of the global merger rationale discussed in the research literature, it is necessary to turn our attention to general observations on mergers in the Russian context.

Russian higher education reforms in the last decades have been keeping up with the global trends. The governmental policies has set the goals of increasing economic efficiency of state universities through stimulating competition and promoting financial autonomy, creating world-class universities and setting quality assurance procedures for institutions. The researchers of

problems in Russian higher education identify the gap between the skills of university graduates and the real needs of employees; issues of world university ratings; enhancing quality of higher education; issues of financial support for universities; low practical value of research of faculty; and no study programs taught in English as the main challenges of modern Russian higher education (Brovkin, 2018; Bobrova, 2018). Some of the policy problems are of international character (e.g. relevance, quality, contribution to the economy and internationalization which would be discussed later) but even though the aims of the reforms might be similar to world-wide trends, the policies work differently in countries of different governance regimes (Forrat, 2012).

In order to understand the full scope of higher education reorganization with regards to mergers in Russia, we need to make a step back into the Soviet times. In 1990-91 study year there used to be 514 higher education institutions in the USSR (Russian Statistical Yearbook, 2018). After the dissolution of the Union, part of the universities stayed where it territorially used to be, e.g. in modern Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Georgia, Armenia, etc. Using the time when the country was in crisis and didn't have enough resources to control the field of higher education, private higher education providers started to establish their own higher education institutions which often offered educational programs of questionable quality. By 2010-11 study year there have been 1115 higher education institutions which is two times more than in the whole Soviet Union (Russian Statistical Yearbook, 2018). Furthermore, it became common to open branch institutions of a given university in other cities thus the number of actual higher education institutions was indeed higher. In 2015 the government adopted the program of closing down inefficient universities and their branches. The criteria for the assessment of efficiency were very controversial: there was no attention paid to the specific profiles of the universities. The governmental plan was to merge the "weak" institutions to the stronger ones so the number of universities would be reduced which in its turn would make enrollment more competitive and of a higher quality. Eventually by 2017-2018 study year the number of higher education institutions has become 766 (Russian Statistical Yearbook, 2018). The cuts in the number of universities can also be explained by demographical crisis of the 1990es: up to 2010 the natural population growth was negative and the number of students naturally went down, which means that there were too many universities and too few students.

In order to improve quality of Russian higher education, the government initiated the restructuring of higher organization institutions and supported the creation of Russian leading universities which were seen as drivers for innovation and development on federal, national and international levels. After the reorganization, now the system of Russian leading universities consists of 2 national universities, 10 federal universities, 29 national research universities and

33 regional flagship universities. All of them serve different national, regional and local goals and it is of interest to mention that all the federal and some regional flagship universities were created by mergers of several institutions. So far there is unfortunately little research done on the specific results of Russian mergers, but the overall tendency is that the universities who took part in mergers improved their efficiency as opposed to the pre-merger state (Zinkovsky and Derkachev, 2016).

2.3 Analytical framework

While the main focus of this research is merger in higher education, the concept of merger is analyzed in the context of government policies and reforms. This study recognizes policies as a great source of valuable information and views examining policy content as essential since it may help us detect the ways mergers are addressed in a chosen country and state why higher education institutions in this country need to merge. In other words, we expect policies to shed light on the problems which mergers are intended to solve so that we could explore the nature of mergers as a policy instrument in a particular case country.

Gornitzka (1999) defines policy as a public statement of an objective and the kind of instruments that will be used to achieve it. Each policy can be analyzed by means of its characteristics, of which policy problems and policy instruments (tools) present the greatest value for this research. Policy problems are generally based on social problems and issues that have been identified by people (society) or government. The research literature which was referred to at the stage of formulating theoretical considerations (Skodvin (1999), Rocha (2018), Pinheiro et al. (2016), etc.) enables us to conclude that the majority of higher education policies in various countries are aimed at strengthening quality, improving relevance and enhancing internationalization of higher education. Moreover, in the light of active adoption of the New Public Management theory around the world and its implications for higher education (Dill, 2014), a great attention is given to making higher education institutions contribute to the economy. In our opinion, it is important to examine these policy problems with a greater level of detail before studying them in the context of mergers, thus the following review presents how quality, relevance, internationalization and innovation are addressed in the research literature.

2.3.1 Policy problems

1. Quality

Since 1990s quality has moved from a debatable concept to an everyday issue in higher education. Up until now the researchers cannot agree on the unified definition of

what quality in higher education is: everyone knows what it is, it is just hard to define. Harvey and Green (1993) were the first to formulate a workable definition of quality. They categorized quality in higher education as exception, perfection, value for money, fitness for purpose and transformation. While this definition may not be very precise, it remains central point of reference for many researchers. Furthermore, it highlights a very important issue in the quality of higher education, namely the different perspectives of different stakeholders.

It is the quality assurance that allows people to have confidence in the quality of higher education. Research on quality assurance tends to be split into two areas: external and internal quality assurance processes. External quality assurance is usually supported by government so the institutions have to engage in it and is usually executed in the form of audit, accreditation, performance indicators, national qualification frameworks, etc. Audit is a key activity of quality assurance agencies. Being a mechanism of accountability, audit made universities take quality assurance seriously and put teaching and learning at the top of their agendas. On the other hand, higher education academics recognize audit as a sign of distrust of their professionalism. Another tool of accountability is performance indicators which are used for various political ends. The overall view is that these indicators are regarded with suspicion due to over-reliance on students' evaluations and graduate employment since those don't measure the underlying issues (Williams and Harvey, 2015). Accreditation, as an external quality assurance activity, has also provoked many discussions and debates. Many share the opinion that accreditation should be executed on the institutional, not the program level with the latter being costly and imposed by politicians on higher education sector.

Research on internal quality assurance has concentrated on teaching quality and learning enhancement. It has also given attention to methods of data collection on quality of provision and stakeholders' (in particular, of students and academic staff) understanding of quality and quality processes. According to the literature, processes of quality assurance do not match the expectations of academics (Williams and Harvey, 2015). They perceive quality assurance as something extra and do not see the link between the quality of their academic work and the performance embodied in quality assurance processes. At the same time, there is a lot of emphasis given to the quality of student experience where the assessment of student learning constitutes the core element of the issue. Student feedback on their own experience has become a significant source of data for quality assurance since it presents up-to-date information and informs continuous quality improvement. Furthermore, as employment rates of graduates is one of the core

concerns of students, internal quality assurance mechanisms give much attention to the development of discipline knowledge and generic skills.

According to Baldwin (1997), the combination of external and internal quality assurance processes has resulted in more rigorous course approval procedures; increased awareness of students' perspectives on teaching and learning; and the development of debates about effective learning. On the other hand he points out that quality assurance can be characterized by excessive bureaucratization of procedures; greatly increased administrative workload for academic staff; formalism of quality assurance procedures; and de-professionalization of academic staff associated with a lack of trust.

The research into quality assurance has been significant in a number of ways. It has challenged the long-held broad definitions of quality and has highlighted the important and complex role that quality assurance plays in higher education. It has also identified the need for continuous evaluation as part of quality improvement and has required those responsible for quality assurance to be more specific about their aims and more transparent in their approaches.

Nevertheless there is a lack of research into the differences of national quality assurance agencies and their concerns. There is a tendency to accept the rightness of import of quality assurance models without questioning their appropriateness for different national and cultural settings. The notion of quality assurance as a unified concept fails to exist in practice and the continuing application of the industrial quality assurance models supports the belief that higher education is a market.

2.   Relevance

Relevance is a term that is employed to address the outcomes of higher education in general or the outcomes that impact society in particular (Cummings and Teichler, 2014). Such outcomes include for instance the use of knowledge and contribution to the technological advancement, economic growth, societal well-being and cultural richness. In this respect, there is always an issue of different higher education stakeholders (political and economic leaders, students, their parents) that usually have different expectations of what higher education should deliver. Furthermore, what is relevant varies by time and place. When the classical university was established in Europe over 800 years ago, there was a need to manage large and geographically dispersed religious bureaucracy, thus law, philosophy, language and theology were highly relevant. These subjects dominated higher education till XIX century with the growing emphasis on medicine. The processes of industrialization and modernization which came later were

followed by the increasing relevance of natural sciences and engineering. In the latter part of XX century social and life sciences received great attention in the sector of higher education.

In the course of history we can note that higher education has always had the challenging task of balancing between the pressures of those in power and the struggle to secure the freedom of pursuing the knowledge. In the recent years, there has increased the variety of narratives about the disciplinary developments and their links to societal expectations. At the same time, there is a growing expectation of relevance due to the growing student numbers and research activities all over the world.

The issue of university education and its relevance to working life is a shared concern in the majority of countries. In that respect, there are two fundamental questions: how higher education produces relevant outcomes in future life and how and when we can access them; and to what extent and whether at all higher education institutions help graduates secure their position in future working life (Yoshimoto and Yamada, 2007). The researchers highlight the four main issues related to the relevance of higher education to working life: immediate and long-term outcomes of mass higher education; transition to working life and fully-fledged citizenship; diversification and stratification of higher education institutions and curricular innovation and student experience. The massification of higher education has resulted in the expansion of disciplinary framework of research. It now includes insights from sociology and pedagogical studies in addition to economics, and such topics as integration of academic and vocational learning with the aim of promoting inclusion; flexibility; integration of initial education; and life-long learning have become typical in higher education reports. Simultaneously with the growth of student numbers, many countries have to handle the prolongation of the youth period and the delay of becoming a full-time worker. Another result of quantitative expansion in higher education is higher education systems in advanced countries becoming diversified in specific ways. Therefore, the increasing number of institutions and their capacity stimulates competition, diversification and stratification. Last but not least, the issue of curricular innovation and student experience has been recently given much attention. After higher education expansion which started in 1960s, there came the demand for curricular innovation. Many countries started taking into consideration curricular relevance which led to the introduction of more practically oriented choices. The major trend can be described as a movement from academically oriented towards more vocational courses.

3. Internationalization

When internationalization as a term began to be widely used in 1980s, it was mostly discussed in the context of international students and educational exchange. In the course of more than 30 years there has been a great amount of various international initiatives undertaken by higher education institutions, organizations and governments. All these ideas have evolved to the point that nowadays internationalization is a permanent component of higher education landscape in every country. At the same time, any study of internationalization needs to take into account the differences among countries and note the fact that rationales, approaches, priorities, risks and benefits do differ for each of them.

J. Knight (2012) defines internationalization as the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education. Nowadays this process encompasses a great variety of initiatives that have brought into play very different actors, for instance, educational institutions, government departments, semi-governmental organizations, public and private foundations, etc. The activities of these actors are diverse and include student mobility, research, information exchange, training, quality assurance, scholarships, etc.

The rationales behind internationalization are reflected in policies and various development and implementation programs. In her study Knight (2012) uses the results of the International Association of Universities surveys in 2003, 2005 and 2009 where the respondents from more than 100 countries shared their opinions on the rationales driving internationalization. In all the three stages of the survey the top rationale has been to prepare students to be interculturally competent and knowledgeable about international issues. At the same time there can be noticed fundamental changes in internationalization drivers since the issue of creating and enhancing institution's profile and reputation has gained its importance. This fact indicates that there is much weight put on the development of international brand which in its turn raises the question whether a smart and successful marketing is more important than the integration of intercultural and global dimension into teaching and learning process.

The complexity that internationalization has gained through years can also be supported by its division into categories, namely "internationalization at home" and "cross-boarder education". The concept of internationalization at home has been developed to lure more attention to campus-based strategies of international dimension of higher education. There is a strong belief that students and faculty need more understanding of international and global issues as well as better intercultural skills even

if they never leave their home country. Cross-country education, in its turn, refers to the movement of people, programs, knowledge, ideas, projects and services across the national boundaries in face-to-face or virtual delivery modes. In a related move, there is an increasing shift from student mobility to program and provider mobility. The number of students coming to a foreign country for their studies is still growing (in fact, it is estimated to increase to 7.2 million in 2025 as opposed to 1.8 million in 2000), but there is developing interest in delivering foreign academic courses and programs in the students' home country (Knight, 2012).

Internationalization has obtained great significance at the levels of policy-making and institutional leadership as it has the potential to bring about positive change in the areas of relevance and quality. It also affects what, how, where and from whom students learn; how higher education institutions and systems perceive their role and mission; how research is carried out and disseminated; and how higher education cooperation and competition are understood (Rumbley et al., 2012). Moreover, a closer look at policies and plans of universities, government ministries and international associations reveals that internationalization of education and research is closely linked to economic and innovation competitiveness and soft power competition. At the same time, it has already been noted that local realities of wealth, language, academic development and many other factors affect the extent to which institutions are able to internationalize. This means that higher education leaders must be prepared to follow the broadest global trends in higher education while at the same time pay attention to the local communities and regional and national contexts.

4.   Innovation and contribution to economy

The society has experienced a fundamental upheaval in the past decades which has influenced organization of the whole public sector. Higher education has been confronted with growing marketization and the strengthening role of the state in creating and regulating markets as well as guiding the whole reform process. Alongside with teaching students and conducting research, universities were assigned to the "third mission" which can be defined as social, enterprising and innovation activities that create additional benefits for society (Zomer and Benneworth, 2011). One of the drivers of universities' third mission is competitiveness and the urgent imperative of usefulness. The emergence of knowledge society has brought the significance of knowledge capital as a foundation of economic success. Knowledge embedded in individuals and people's ability to work together is now seen as a source of economic growth, and there has been drawn a

connection between an ability to innovate and opportunity for economic benefit. As a result, policy-makers have become aware of economic and political value of universities in advancing innovation and have urged universities to take broader societal responsibilities such as contributing to the competitiveness of economy.

Placed under the societal demand of useful knowledge, universities engage with other kinds of commercial knowledge producers and this has changed the overall understanding of what kinds of knowledge are appropriate. There is a growing concern of universities with the relevance of the knowledge they create, and the efforts of universities to commercialize their research shape the wider higher education system. According to Zomer and Benneworth (2011), commercialization has become one of the fundamental activities of university while the "third mission" characterizes the contemporary higher education alongside with governance, research excellence, quality assurance, funding, etc.

But how is it possible that people with higher education contribute more to the economy than people with little education? Answering this question, Lundvall (2008) uses the studies of Nelson and Phelps (1965) and Schultz (1975). Nelson and Phelps indicate two reasons why people with higher education bring more benefits to the economy: one of them is that they are able to perform regular tasks with more efficiency, and the other one is that they are more competent when it comes to take advantage of new technological opportunities in economy. A general assumption from this would be that big investments into higher education would return as big technological accomplishments and progress. At the same time Lundvall notes that the role of higher education in innovation needs to be assessed in the context of the general development of national innovation systems.

Schultz supports the idea of more educated individuals being more beneficial for the economy with the suggestion that education makes a person better prepared when exposed to change. A more educated person will be more competent in finding a solution, and this "skill" of finding a solution is assumed to be one of the major impacts of education. Furthermore, if we take knowledge as the most important source of economic benefits, consequently learning is the most important process in the modern era.

As it was mentioned earlier, governments around the world view mergers as a multi-purpose tool which has all the potential to help address perceived shortcomings of higher education systems and reach the desired state. Further discussion elaborates on the role of mergers in solving the problems which were identified above.

Most of the authors who study mergers in higher education list quality enhancement among the desired outcomes. Creating huge multi-disciplinary institutions instead of small narrow-specialized higher education organizations is seen as a great possibility for improving excellence. Mergers make it possible to achieve such improvement by combining academic talent and infrastructure, greater financial and staff resources, interdisciplinary research with a wider variety of subject area, etc. (DEFINE Thematic Report: University Mergers in Europe, 2015) Skodvin (1999) suggests that there are at least three ways in which mergers help enhance quality of higher education: they eliminate duplicative programs; they increase academic collaboration and help create new multi- and interdisciplinary fields; and they help diversify academic profiles of institutions which strengthens their position in national and international markets.

Furthermore, mergers may have a positive effect on quality assurance processes and make them more useful for institutions. For instance, there is a growing concern over the importance of peer review and its role for internal quality assurance. When institutions merge, teaching staff with different working backgrounds create a professional network which allows them to share experiences and provide each other with feedback. It is also of significance to mention the fact that due to a competitive nature of mergers, teaching staff with the highest qualifications gets access to a new institution which may result in higher level of student satisfaction. The accumulation of different sorts of resources (human, administrative, financial, even territorial) helps universities review their rates of performance indicators and improve them.

Another policy problem that has been identified is relevance and it would be critical to underestimate it. Current students tend to place great importance not only to the subject they want to study but also to the prospect of future employability. Even their study choices are sometimes driven by the relevance of subject at the current moment. Therefore it is crucial for higher education institutions to monitor job markets and offer relevant knowledge. As far as mergers are concerned, it is easier for bigger multidisciplinary institutions to establish contacts with different companies and industries so that students could try themselves in real work settings and see how their knowledge works in practice. Furthermore, universities organized by mergers have more resources to practice new methods of teaching which educate students' skills of critical thinking, flexibility, teamwork, problem solving, etc. Information and knowledge received with the help of such methods present a bigger value and relevance for students for it enables them to make connections between their knowledge and the real world.

It is not only students' expectations of what is relevant that matter, but also the expectations of society. Thus universities have an additional function of serving the interests of society. Such interests include different technological, economical and cultural contributions to

the societal well-being or, for example, a demand for certain specialists. By means of mergers, universities improve not only the amount of social contribution, but also its quality to the degree that the emergence of interdisciplinary fields allows new approaches to social problems and their solutions.

Internationalization, as a policy issue, has received a lot of attention especially among academic community. The point of the discussion is, as it was mentioned earlier, is the growing importance of international branding as opposed to integration of international dimension into post-secondary education. Leaving this debatable issue aside, it would be fair to state, that mergers make considerable contribution into international profiling of universities. First of all, it is inevitable that due to mergers universities grow in size and it would be reasonable to suggest that the bigger university attracts the greater number of international students, staff and researchers: bigger universities have more study programs and research fields to choose from and are better equipped (technically, administratively, etc.) to cater for various educational and scientific demands. Furthermore merger processes entail reorganization of university's management and administration, development of university's profile, its mission and strategic goals. Being a complex issue itself, internationalization has to also be viewed in a strategic way: universities need to reconsider its priorities and settle areas of focus. Such focused attention makes international cooperation more efficient and productive. Besides, the concentration of different resources, accumulated as a result of merger, and a greater variety of disciplines also make universities more attractive for international partnership and various kinds of student and staff exchange.

When it comes to resources, technological infrastructure of a university plays a great role in building university's competitiveness. During mergers, such resources are not only collected from institutions taking part in merger, but are also sponsored by government and other stakeholders that support merger. Consequently, such universities are better prepared to use online modes of knowledge delivery, launch different kinds of (joint) online study programs and organize and take part in various international study projects. Financial incentives are another kind of resources which universities may obtain due to mergers. In cases when mergers of public universities are initiated by government, it may use financial support to stimulate universities' decision to merge. When universities have such funding available, it is easier for them to exercise international cooperation and organize various international projects, lectures and exchange programs.

Universities have been always seen as a source of innovation; more importantly, research has been traditionally one of university's functions (Castells, 2001). It is rational to suggest that the bigger the university is, the more and better quality research it can exercise. Bigger

universities are usually better technically equipped, they have better qualified research teams, their research strategies are more balanced, etc. Such combination of advantages makes bigger universities more attractive for government and other stakeholders to invest in. Thus bigger universities have higher chances of winning grants from government or getting offers of joint research with various companies, etc. One more benefit of mergers is the opportunity to do multi- and interdisciplinary research since mergers make a new university's profile more diverse by combining features of higher education institutions that existed prior to merger. It has been mentioned before, that nowadays the importance of knowledge is in its relevance, and it is the interdisciplinary research that has the highest applicability in the modern world.

It is not only material side (for example, patents or ready-to-use items) of interdisciplinary research that matters, but also the influence of such environment on students. If it is stated that people with higher education are more beneficial for the economy because during their studies they obtain the skills which help them in their future career, bigger multidisciplinary universities give students opportunity to get familiar with various disciplines (by means of public lectures) which widens their horizons and increases the quality of the obtained skills.

As we can see, every of the discussed policy problem is a complex one and can be a subject of its own separate research. Moreover, it is evident that these problems are interrelated since elaboration on relevance mentions economic benefits, and internationalization is seen as able to have a positive influence on quality and relevance. It is also clear that theoretically mergers can be used as an instrument to address all these problems. The research interest of this study is the way these policy problems are addressed in Russian higher education reforms, which of them are prioritized and whether there are any county-specific problems that are intended to be solved with the help of mergers.

2.3.2 Policy instruments

Policies do not only state a problem, but also provide ways of solving it. In other words, policies state the kinds of instruments (tools) which are to be used to address the problem. The current study considers merger as a policy tool employed to higher education institutions in order to solve the challenges of higher education systems. Having discussed the most common policy problems in the previous chapter, we need to also examine policy instruments as it is another policy component fundamental for this study. The current chapter presents a theoretical overview of policy instruments based on the "NATO-scheme" of Hood. In 1983 Hood formulated the four categories of tools which governments employ to influence society. According to him, these are nodality (information), treasure (money), authority (legal official power) and organization, which

all together constitute the "NATO-scheme". Following the discussion of Hood, we would be able to learn what kind of policy instruments there are, how each of them functions both in theory and in practice and why governments use them:

1. Nodality

Nodality gives government the ability of being in the centre of a social network. Such a position of centrality, visibility and interconnectedness equips government with a strategic position to detect and gather information and to produce information itself at the same time. Nowadays nodal "receiving" and "effecting" tools are used by governments so widely that almost everyone will find that in one form or another they give information to or obtain it from government.

For example, there is a great amount of information that government receives as a by-product. There are thousands of people buying metro tickets everyday and there is a vast range of information that can be extracted from it: rush hours, the most popular stations, the percentage of students/senior citizens who use metro, etc. Moreover, if one is registered in any kind of government database, e.g. health services or tax returns, government under certain circumstances does get access to this type of information without creating any extra tools for information gathering. Another way for government of obtaining information while staying relatively "passive" is acting as an "ear trumpet" and provoking citizens to bring it to them. Free telephone lines or local advice centers serve as perfect examples to this way of receiving information. Media is another source of information for government. This is particularly true for the modern digital era when large amounts of information are posted online and government doesn't have to change its "passive" mode to get it. When it does switch its mode to active is to conduct, for example, public opinion surveys. On the other hand, nowadays government usually employs polling companies to carry out such research which makes it not purely nodal.

As well as the abovementioned ways of how nodality is used to obtain information, it can also be a basis for effecting tools which help shape individuals' opinions. In fact, information (and disinformation) was used as an effecting tool since ancient times and governments still heavily rely on this instrument. Having a long history of providing information to its citizens, there are a lot of ways for government to do so. One example of this is notifications we get when some of our official documents are about to expire (some ID documents, driver license, etc.). This kind of information is usually produced automatically out of databases and is then delivered individually to its receiver. The mode of information delivery can also be group-targeted. These groups of people are usually

chosen by government to disseminate the information further, e.g. when journalists are invited to conferences on some issues or when doctors are advised which medicine is preferable to be prescribed. But the government can choose not to use any mediums and "broadcast" the information to whom it may concern. Most of what government does this way can be seen as propaganda in a sense that information is aimed at a mass audience and no special knowledge is required in order to comprehend it. It is of interest to note, that distribution of information is not the only application of propaganda. By propagating another, government suppresses the information they want to keep silent about. However, this still helps to persuade and structure opinions of those who receive the information.

2.   Authority

Authority can be defined as the ability to prohibit and permit, command and comment through recognized procedures and such identifying symbols as seals, watermarks, etc. Governmental orders, bans, licenses, certificates, requisitions, etc. are intended to convey not simply information, but authority to the outside world. As well as nodality, government uses authority both for information gathering and changing behaviour.

The main instrument of government to detect information is requisition. As opposed to nodality when government takes advantage of being in the centre of social network, when getting information through authority government requires it under the threat of some kind of sanction. One of the examples of such is obligation to notify. Sometimes we are required to notify government of the actions we are planning to do (as for instance, when we are planning to visit a foreign country and submit our documents for visa); other times we are required to notify government about some event that has happened (car accidents, confirmations of paying fees, etc.). Registrations of births, deaths, marriages, also cars, boats, guns, dogs are further examples of our obligation to notify. Another way of government obtaining information through its authority is returns as in the case of tax returns or obligations for some companies to produce reports. There is a certain link to obligation to notify with a difference to the extent that the request of return comes at regular fixed intervals (monthly, quarterly or annually) while the former is triggered if a certain event takes place. Other examples of gathering information with the help of authority are interrogation and inspection. This way government not only requires information, but also embeds itself in gathering it while citizens are demanded to make themselves, their property or papers available for examination. By interrogation citizens are expected to attend on government for investigation of some issues. By

inspection government authorities go out themselves to inspect factories, retail stores and other businesses sometimes in the form of unexpected check-ups. In both cases the informant is expected to cooperate and refusal of such can lead to legal penalties.

The basic tools of effecting with authority are demand and prohibition. These instruments can be distinguished by the number of people they apply to: they can be applied to specific individuals, places, organization and objects or generally to anyone and everyone. They can also differ in a degree of restriction introduced: approvals or recommendations imply a low constraint while orders and bans entail a high degree of constraint. For instance, certificates are low-constraint authoritative statement of properties of an individual or an object often based on fitness or unfitness. Contrary to certificates, conditionals and enablements (e.g. licences, quotas, vouchers, permits) bring in a medium degree of constraint since they positively demand or prohibit an activity. With the help of conditionals government declares the conditions of a deal which a citizen may take or not. Thus the outcome of the deal depends on the turn of the events. Enablements, in its turn, permit an activity, which otherwise would be prohibited, to be carried on.

3.   Treasure

Treasure, as a resource of government, stands for different kinds of positive incentives or inducements that government uses to secure information or change behaviour. Therefore the term treasure implies not only its literal sense of money but also other applications. Treasure enables government to exchange, to buy favours, to cultivate popularity, etc. so it is impossible to underestimate the power of treasure. There is a number of ways government uses treasure as a resource: it can stimulate some of the social policies, offer grants and loans, provide subsidies, etc. In fact, government is the biggest purchaser in society, buying items not only for itself but also for the use of its citizens (e.g. computers for schools or means of public transportation).

When government uses treasure to detect information, it uses rewards to buy it and there can be distinguished different kinds of rewards. Sometimes individuals or organizations approach government themselves, offer some information and claim a reward for it. Rewards from government can also be advertised as in such cases when government needs information on the location of wanted criminals. It is very seldom that government provides money without asking questions thus denying itself the possibility of obtaining information as a by-product so there are other cases when the reward is not advertised and government obtains information from applications (e.g. visa applications

or applications for welfare benefits). Information exchange and active propositions are another ways of gathering information with the help of treasure. When exchanging information the parties are rewarded by gaining access to the pool of data which is created by individuals or organizations for mutual benefit. For instance, when one visits employment agency in the search of job and provides their resume or CV, they get access to a database of available vacancies. Another way of a reward that government offers to the informants is propositions, as in cases when government turns to consultants or experts for some specific kind of information and offers reward for their service.

When government uses treasure as an effecting tool, it shapes the behavior by exchanging treasure for some good or service or by "giving it away" without requiring anything in return. The exchange of treasure is usually carried out by customized payments which are payments that fit the circumstances of a particular individual. The examples of these are contracts and transfers. Contracts are paid to a specific individual in exchange for something – the one who receives government's treasure is required to supply, produce or promise something. Government uses contracts to stimulate citizens to do things that they are already predisposed to do and encourage them to do things that they would not tried to do in the absence of government's help. Transfers are another kind of customized payments which differ from contracts to a degree that transfers do not imply any kind of exchange. They are made to individuals who government is pledged to make such payments, such as veterans or pensioners. Those payments do not fall into category of open payments, though they are not made in exchange for anything, since the identity of the person or organization that is receiving it is essential. Open payments are those cases when government grants its treasure without much concern about the identity of a receiver. Those payments are usually made when government wants to encourage its citizens, for example, to farm anything or grow crops. The payment is made in exchange for something but the individual or organization that is providing it is not specified.

4.   Organization

As a tool of government, organization represents a collection of land, buildings, equipment and individuals with whatever skills and contacts they may have, which all either belong to government or are available to it. Just like other three resources, organization can be used for both detecting information and effecting on subjects, their property or their environment.

When government uses organization for information gathering, it relies on technical and physical tools such as equipment and trained staff. The information is then usually

obtained involuntarily or without cooperation of the informant. Furthermore, there is no other way but to use such means when the object of inquiry is non-human, e.g. land surveys or weather patterns. One of such means is turnstiles. Turnstile is one of the most passive devices for information gathering as it is placed in such a way that it is difficult to go past or through it. For instance, we all have to go through turnstiles at the airport and this is how government gets to know not only what one has in their bags but also some of their health peculiarities (whether a person has a pacemaker or a titanium sheet). Most of the modern shops and other public places are equipped with fixed scanners which help observe over some field of activity. In its turn, mobile scanners rely on physical tools and require the forces of government to move about in order to collect information as when traffic wardens patrol the streets and identify illegally parked vehicles. Secret recorders and hidden cameras are examples of hidden scanners which help government obtain information by detectors that are deliberately concealed from the informant.

When it comes to effecting with the help of organization, government uses direct actions and treatments. Treatments differ by the number of people (or subjects) that they are designed to affect. Individual treatments are all those cases when government acts directly on individuals or specific property or organizations. Treatments can also be categorized into four main forms. When treatment comes in the form of marking, it is used, for example, for marking the trees that are diseased or chipping animals. Storage and custody are another form of treatment which covers a wide range of government activities from maintaining strategic reserves of food to managing prisons and detention facilities. The third form of treatment is transportation and distribution. It is government's organizational capacity for transportation and distribution that helps arrange such activities as garbage collection or food and medical supply of the victims of natural and other disasters. Processing, the forth main way of treatment, enables government to change the state of a subject, e.g. when humans are vaccinated against some diseases or those defined as criminals are punished. However, treatments can be applied not only to individuals or their property but to specific groups. Evacuation of refugee groups from a place of danger can serve as an example of group transportation. Furthermore, treatments can be aimed at the world at large or to whoever it may concern. Government may change physical environment in which we function by providing facilities such as parks, gardens and bridges or exhibiting collections of art and culture.

Thus we can conclude that according to Hood all four categories of government tools can be both detective and effective. Depending on case and goals, government may apply nodal,

authority, treasure and organizational tools for gathering information and/or forming individuals' opinion. The subject of this study – merger of higher education institutions – presents the example of an organizational tool since higher education institutions generally either belong to government or government has the access to them. We can also suggest that government uses merger as an effecting tool in a form of a processing group treatment since merger policies are usually targeted at all higher education institutions and initiate change in their state.

However, it is not only tool of organization which offers value for the current research; the real-life policy instruments rarely present pure examples of tools and often combine characteristics of several tool categories discussed by Hood (Gornitzka, 1999). For instance, we can suggest that there is a strong link between merger and treasure: in many merger cases government provides additional financing to universities so that they suggest ways of quality enhancement or improving their research abilities. Moreover, it is usually government that decides on the number of student places in each educational program. In essence, government and university agree that government covers all financial issues for a given number of students while university gives them access to knowledge. Thus the bigger the university is, the more funding it would get. The same rule is generally applied when it comes to all sorts of projects (both national and international) when government uses its tools of treasure to finance them and authority to allow or prohibit them. Furthermore, before and after the merger has been implemented, a university has to present a plan of merger or a result of it which both are the examples of government exercising its result of authority. As far as nodality is concerned, government's position in the centre of social network enables it to detect current and future relevance of some professions and distribute this information to universities of which the bigger multi-discipline universities created with the help of merger would provide more opportunities for interdisciplinary research and creating new programs for the new professions.

These are only a few examples of ways in which government tools might be interconnected. Thus we suggest it would be effective to consider merger not only as the example of purely organizational tool, but as the example of complex policy instrument combining characteristics of many other government tools.

2.4 Approaches to understanding merger rationale

In attempt to understand the popularity of mergers we turn to the work of Tom Christensen, Per Lægreid, Paul G. Roness and Kjell Arne Røvik. In their book "Organization

Theory and the Public Sector. Instrument, culture and myth" they distinguish the two perspectives which can be used to analyze change processes in the public sector. These are instrumental and institutional perspectives, and the major distinction between them is that instrumental perspective regards organizations as tools in the hands of leaders while institutional perspective recognizes organizations with their own rules, values and norms. Thus instrumental perspective limits an individual's choice of action but creates possibilities for realizing particular goals whereas institutional perspective provides some independency in decision-making.

According to Christensen et al. there are three ways in which these approaches can be distinguished: 1) the logic of action of organization's members; 2) the view on politics and 3) the view of organizational change. The logic of action in the instrumental perspective is a logic of consequence based on a means-end rationality when one attempts to anticipate the future effect of a given action. The logic of institutional perspective is the logic of appropriateness where one acts either according to the previous positive experience or according to what feels appropriate in the environment one works in. The goals in the instrumental approach are defined externally and are formulated by leaders. Policy-making then presents finding suitable means of achieving the goals. On the contrary, institutional perspective allows the goals to be formulated from the inside; thus policy deals with forming opinions. Change is seen by instrumental perspective as a rational adjustment to goals or external demands while institutional perspective sees organizations as more bottom-heavy so that change will be implemented more slowly and gradually. These are the key distinctions between the two approaches, which will be discussed in more detail below.

2.4.1 Instrumental perspective

One of the functions of public organizations is to carry out tasks on behalf of society. According to Christensen et al. in higher education this would require developing study reforms through government ministries and implementing study programs in public universities and colleges. Thus public organizations can be viewed as tools or instruments for achieving some goals which are thought to be significant in society.

All organizations have goals which can be understood as ideas of what they would like to achieve in future. Consequently, a problem for an organization can be understood as a gap between the desired and the actual state of things. For public organization these problems include problems formulated by public administration, so the organizations engage in the process of lessening or eliminating this gap. In order to close the gap organizations first assess the

difference between the desired and the actual state of affairs, develop which actions can be taken, consider consequences of each of the actions and then decide which alternative is better.

Furthermore, Christensen et al. familiarize us with two opposite ideas, namely full instrumental rationality and bounded rationality. When organization has clear goals and a full overview into actions which might be taken and all the consequences that these actions may lead to, Christensen et al. call it full instrumental rationality. In such a case organization often chooses what helps achieve the desired goal with the maximum degree. On the contrary, bounded rationality presents cases when organization's goals are not precise or unstable and the problems are complex. Moreover, an organization may know of only limited amount of alternatives and has to make a decision even unsure of the possible consequences. In such cases an organization chooses an alternative which is not the best (since it may be unaware of the best alternative) but good enough, thus achieving not maximum but satisfactory results.

2.4.2 Cultural version of institutional perspective

In their work, Christensen et al. make a distinction between cultural and myth versions both constituting institutional perspective, thus we would first discuss a cultural version and then turn to a myth version.

Contrary to the instrumental perspective, where the logic of actions is the logic of consequence, cultural version of institutional perspective is built upon logic of cultural appropriateness. This means that when acting in public situations, one will not be considering positive and negative consequences of actions, but will employ what Christensen et al. call "matching" – linking situation with the identities of organizations. Such identities are also called organizational cultures, which authors define as informal norms and values that become important for organizations' actions. According to the logic of appropriateness, goals are not formulated by the political leaders, but are discovered in the process alongside with norms and values of an organization.

Matching an identity and a situation may have different basis. What is interesting for this study is that among other origins, there is a possibility to use the experiences of other public organizations. For example, while developing plans for reorganizations, public organizations often study the experiences of other countries or international organizations and then evaluate whether those are appropriate and relevant.

The term "external pressure" can also be seen in the light of cultural version. The point is that a public organization interacts with or is dependent on the environment which the external pressure comes from. Thus what actors in this environment do, becomes significant for the

organization and consequently public universities and colleges will be influenced by the cultural norms of, for example, ministries which impose the pressure.

2.4.3 Myth version of institutional perspective

It is often referred as the New Institutional School in organization theory, when an organization functions in institutional environment where it is forced by social norms of how this organization should be designed and how it should operate. The organization then must try to implement these norms even if they do not necessarily make the organization's work more effective. Due to the adoption of these norms organizations become similar. Christensen et al. call such norms "myths" and note that they can be spread through imitation.

Why would organizations imitate each other? Organization seeking validity from institutional environment must demonstrate that they live up to the norms of modernity, such as continuous growth, innovation and rationality (Christensen et al., 2007). These norms and ideas of how modern organizations should look, what structure they should have and what procedures they should practice often become fashionable – they become what all public organizations should do until something else would be defined as modern and thus fashionable. Such ideas (may also be called "rationalized myths") can present effective tools which can be used to achieve goals. Furthermore, for a period of time, it is taken for granted that they are efficient and modern ways of steering and organizing. But the most important reason for the increased implementation of myth version is public sector being more exposed to external pressures and ideas in institutional environments. Moreover, public sector became challenged by the ideas of private sector and business. Thus myth version of institutional perspective has shown to be useful in explaining the private-sector-inspired reforms of the public sector.

Based on the work of Christensen et al. there can be distinguished two approaches in explaining the popularity of mergers. The first, instrumental approach sees merger as a tool which may help achieve the stated goals. When challenged with a problem, organizations evaluate possible solutions and choose merger as the solution which potentially provides the maximum efficiency. Since the analysis of the research literature allows us to conclude that there is not one particular problem that mergers is a solution to because mergers can solve a wide variety of problems, it is of no surprise that organizations may turn to mergers when they are enforced with multiple external goals. The other, institutional approach, especially the myth version of it, views merger as an attribute of a modern university inside the global institutional environment. Seeking legitimacy from this environment, universities use the experience of other

universities and implement mergers in order to "keep up" with the recent trends in higher education.

Since our study is aimed at investigating the merger rationale in Russia, these approaches may serve as helpful in understanding the nature of mergers in this country. Are mergers a rational tool which addresses the existing problems and helps achieve the desired outcomes? Or are mergers a sign that a given higher education system is functioning according to the features of modern institutional environment? In order to understand it, we need to study the official documents which give us access to the rationale and show us the ways mergers are addressed.

3 Empirical context, data and method

3.1 Russia as a country case

The first institutions of higher education in Russia were opened in XVII-XVIII centuries. Most of them were initiated by Peter the Great who carried out numerous reforms which demanded specialists in the fields of navigation, mathematics, medicine, mining, etc. In the course of time, the number of universities expanded; there were founded several classical universities in several cities, and generally higher education was dependant on the ruling tsar and his stance towards higher education.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 caused the society reconsider their views of universities. The new administration of the country and the ordinary folk, who previously had no access to higher education, expressed their distaste for former academics. The general crisis of the Revolution worsened the state of affairs in universities and higher education which suffered from scarceness of funding. At the same time, the new government focused their attention on industry and made it key priority to develop and improve enterprises of national economy and properly manage them. In order to do so, many former universities were reorganized into vocational colleges (so called "tekhnikums") where children of non-academics were prioritized during admission. Thus tekhnikums were not part of Russian higher education and have never become.

After the World War II, Russian higher education has drastically changed under the pressures of massification and a new socio-cultural order (Volnikova & Iljin, 2014). In those conditions universities have grown into large complex organizations with various fields of specialization which resulted in Russian universities showing excellent results in research of outer space and nuclear power thus raising the reputation of higher education to its maximum.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 became one more historical cornerstone which undoubtedly affected the sector of higher education. The new country needed to build a new

higher education system which could function autonomously from those of the ex-Soviet republics. Furthermore, the attention has been paid to the proportion of Russian universities in world's higher education. Since the proportion was not great, there was initiated reorganization of institutions with a narrow profile into larger universities, so that the number of universities in Russia has considerably increased (e.g. only in 1992 the number of universities raised from 48 to 97 – Volnikova & Iljin, 2014).

In 2003 Russia joined the Bologna process which entailed a new wave of organizational changes for the Russian higher education system. One of the most significant (and challenging) of them became the introduction of new "bachelor", "master" and "PhD" degrees. The old Russian degrees ("specialist" – a transitional degree between a bachelor's and a master's, "candidate of sciences" – equals the new PhD degree, and "doctor of sciences" – equals German Habilitation) implied completely different study load which challenged and slowed down the reorganization process. It is worth noting that "candidate of sciences" and "doctor of science" are still used in the modern higher education system whereas PhD degree has still not been introduced. Such "dual" system of degrees confuses not only international colleagues but also Russian employers who are not necessarily familiar with the new degree system. Though Russia joined the Bologna in 2003, the actual reorganization of Russian higher education began only in 2010 and it is safe to state that they are not finished yet since "old" degrees have not been completely removed.

One of the reasons why it takes so long to implement changes to Russian higher education is its longer history and more social crises. After the Revolution of 1917 which has built a new socio-political order and after the World War II when a large part of university, academics and students was physically destroyed, the Soviet regime has reconstructed and restored the system of higher education which has functioned for more than 30 years. So it is fairly reasonable to suggest that any kind of organizational change for such a system would be radical and would take longer time to be carried out.

3.2 Methodology

The current study is guided by a deductive theory. The deductive theory first draws on what is already known about a subject or a phenomenon of study and on relevant theoretical ideas in order to formulate research questions. After the relevant subjects and sites of the study have been chosen and the research questions have been formulated, relevant data has to be collected. Data collection method of this study – document analysis – demands doing the preliminary theoretical research and corresponding literature review. The knowledge of the

context is assumed to provide a better understanding of the information that will be revealed during data analysis. After the data will have been collected, it will be interpreted and conceptualized. The nature of qualitative research enables the interplay between interpretation of data and theorizing; the research questions might get more specified and the researcher will then get back to the collection of further data. This data will also need to be conceptualized and only after that the conclusion of the study will take place.

The research design of this study is a case study which requires the detailed and intensive analysis of the case (Bryman, 2016). The case study of national higher education reforms in a selected country is aimed at finding out the approaches to merger as means of organizational change and rationale behind them. The case falls into the category of exemplifying cases which allows the researcher to examine merger policies as one of the current processes in higher education.

The study takes a deductive path and uses qualitative methodology. The starting point of the study is the concept of mergers as a global process in modern higher education. It is assumed that due to the global character of merger process, the rationale of mergers might be similar irrespective of the country where a merger takes place. But it can also be argued that the nation-specific environment might have a particular impact on the decision to merge higher education institutions. Thus the concern of the study is to identify merger rationale in a selected country setting. In order to do so, qualitative methods are seen as the most appropriate to be applied since they enable exploratory work and detailed examination of the case. Likewise, the research questions of the study imply the use of qualitative methodology as it emphasizes the contextual understanding of the analyzed phenomenon.

The main data collection method of this study is document analysis. The documents as sources of data encompass official texts of merger policies. As official documents deriving from the state, merger policies would provide an insight of the state understanding of mergers on the national level and official requirements of the process: reasons, goals, deadlines, etc. Such state vision of mergers may contain both global and national agenda which would enable us to derive peculiarities of merger rationale in different countries. As a source of information, documents deriving from the state present authenticity and credibility.

Validity is an important criterion in establishing and assessing quality of the research. However, the established understanding of how validity should be assessed by quantitative researchers presents challenges for qualitative research since in many cases the validity characteristics, such as validity of concept measurements, causality and generalization of results beyond the context of the study, do not seem to be applicable. One of the possible adaptations of validity issues for qualitative research that Bryman (2016) drives attention to is the one by

LeCompte and Goetz (1982). According to them, internal validity is the correspondence between the researchers' observations and the theoretical ideas they develop. Following this view of internal validity it can then be argued to be the strength of qualitative research since the immersion of the researcher into the problem context and detailed examination of cases allows developing congruence between concepts and observations. External validity then refers to the degree to which the findings of the research can be generalized across social settings. However, qualitative research does not have its goal of generalizing the results; on the contrary, it is usually oriented towards the contextual uniqueness and significance of the aspect being studied. In this case in order to secure external validity, qualitative researchers are encouraged to produce thick descriptions of all the details of the research done. It provides the readers with full context of the study thus enabling them to make judgements about the possible transferability of the results. The notion of the context is important to qualitative research as it emphasizes the importance of contextual understanding of the phenomenon under study. Thus the current research needs to take advantage of thick descriptions in order to secure the external validity.

There is a growing tendency among the researchers to link ethical considerations and the quality of research. In his book on social research Bryman (2016) uses the categorization of Diener and Grandall (1978) when discussing ethical principles: harm to participants; lack of informed consent; invasion of privacy; and deception. These issues do not seem to raise discussions for this study as it does not involve participant observation or interviews but uses the data which is publicly available.

The aim of the study is to investigate the rationale of a selected country in its decision to merge higher education institutions. It is not aimed at determining the approach of the country as good or bad or at contrasting it with the approaches of other countries. The research design, qualitative strategy and corresponding methodology are appropriately aligned in order to contribute theoretically and practically to the discussion of such global process as higher education mergers.

4 Findings

Russian sector of higher education has been experiencing substantial changes during the last 20 years. The share of the population who has obtained higher education has grown, and the number of students and higher education institutions has increased. In 2011, Russian government has expressed its intention to reorganize the system of higher education by means of university consolidation. For instance, in September 2011, Dmitry Medvedev, at that time the President of Russia, emphasized that university mergers and their consolidation have to be of a systematic

character. In July 2012, Vladimir Putin, the President of Russia, gave the task of identifying inefficient state universities. The programs of their reorganization including mergers with stronger universities were to be developed and approved by the end of May 2013.

Since 2012 the Ministry of Education and Science of Russian Federation (since May 2018 – the Ministry of Science and Higher Education) has been monitoring Russian educational institutions with the aim of identifying universities and their branches which show signs of inefficiency. By branches we understand a representation of a bigger university in a small city. Usually university branches have a limited number of educational programs and conform to the rules of a head university. In 2012, 541 state higher education institutions and 994 their branches have taken part in the first monitoring (Monitoring of the work of Federal Educational Institutions of Higher Professional Education, 2012). The criteria of university efficiency have been developed by the Association of the leading universities and consisted of the following:

1. Educational activities: the average results of the Unified State Examination.
   The Unified State Examination (Russian ЕГЭ (EGE) is a unified school leaving exam which also serves as an entrance exam to universities. There are two mandatory examinations – the Russian language and mathematics; other examinations (physics, the English language, chemistry, biology, social studies, history, etc.) are non-compulsory and are chosen by the students according to university study programs (medicine-related study programs imply biology and chemistry as entrance exams, history-related programs imply history and social studies as entrance exams, etc).

2. Scientific and research activities: the amount of research and (technological) development work per one member of academic staff.

3. International activities: the number of international students.

4. Financial and economic activities: university's income from its various sources per one member of academic staff.

5. Infrastructure: the number of study facilities per one student.

For branches these criteria have been expanded and also included the number of students, the number of academic staff and the number of candidates and doctors of sciences among academic staff members. For each criterion there have been developed threshold values. In order for university to be recognized as inefficient its numbers had to be lower for 4 out of 5 criteria. Thus in 2012, 136 universities and 450 branches have been recognized as inefficient. (Melikyan, 2014).

The results of the first monitoring have been discussed at the meeting of the interdepartmental commission where D.V. Livanov (at that time the Minister of Education and Science) stated that recognizing universities as inefficient does not automatically entail severe measures against those universities. After analyzing the results of the monitoring and taking into account the geographical location of universities and their educational profile, there have been developed several ways of addressing the problem: increasing the financial support; strengthening university leadership, managing the number of students; and other measures including university reorganization (by means of mergers). At large, the effect of the first university monitoring on the academic community and on the society was tremendous: its results regarded as inefficient some of the oldest and most respected Russian universities which provoked debates on the validity of monitoring's criteria (Popov, 2015). For example, it has been noted that ignoring a university's profile while monitoring can do more harm than good. Thus, many pedagogical and arts universities have been identified as inefficient. Furthermore, some of the monitoring criteria were different from those of official accreditation and licensing procedures. As a result, some universities were simultaneously officially approved but called out as inefficient. Moreover, the process of monitoring has been accused of being driven by the economic criteria instead of educational ones. In a related move, many of the key aspects of higher education were not taken into consideration while developing the monitoring's criteria. For example, none of the criteria mentioned student employment and graduate evaluation by employees. Other points of criticism were no evaluation of such significant elements of higher education as its quality and universities' mission for society. Last but not least, the technical side of monitoring aroused questions: there have been cases when head universities were recognized as inefficient but their branches were identified as efficient.

After the results of the monitoring were published in December 2012, on the 30th of December there appeared the Decree of the Government of Russian Federation which affirmed the plan of the road map which was devoted to changes in the social sector aimed at increasing the efficiency of education and science. By the "roadmap" we understand a plan of actions which lead to some state; in the case of the Russian roadmap this state is efficiency of education and science. According to this document, the enhancement of the network of public higher education institutions included annual monitorings of higher education institutions' efficiency; *development and implementation of the program of enhancement of higher education institutions' network including their reorganization and mergers between them*; and modernization of licensing and accreditation of educational programs of higher education. Thus mergers were listed as a means of enhancing efficiency and quality of service in higher education. The expected result of such reorganization was a balanced network of higher

education institutions. Furthermore, there was planned university restructuring which would enable 5 Russian universities to enter top 100 of the world leading universities in the world university ranking by 2020 (unfortunately, the document does not specify which ranking it would be). Moreover, the roadmap contained some tables and figures illustrating some quantitative changes:

3. Основные количественные характеристики системы высшего образования

	Единица измерения	2012 год	2013 год	2014 год	2015 год	2016 год	2017 год	2018 год
Численность молодежи в возрасте 17 - 25 лет	тыс. человек	18624	17527	16373	15315	14330	13505	12941
Число образовательных организаций высшего образования, имеющих признаки неэффективности	единиц	167	139	111	84	56	28	-
Численность обучающихся по программам высшего образования, в том числе	тыс. человек	6490	6314	6099	5866	5630	5389	5145
приведенный контингент	-"-	2994	2842	2694	2361	2206	2174	2149
Число студентов в расчете на 1 преподавателя	человек	9,4	9,4	9,9	10,5	11	11,5	12

Source: the Decree of the Government of Russian Federation from 30 December 2012 № 2620-р on the adoption of the roadmap "Changes in the social sector aimed at enhancement of quality of education and science"
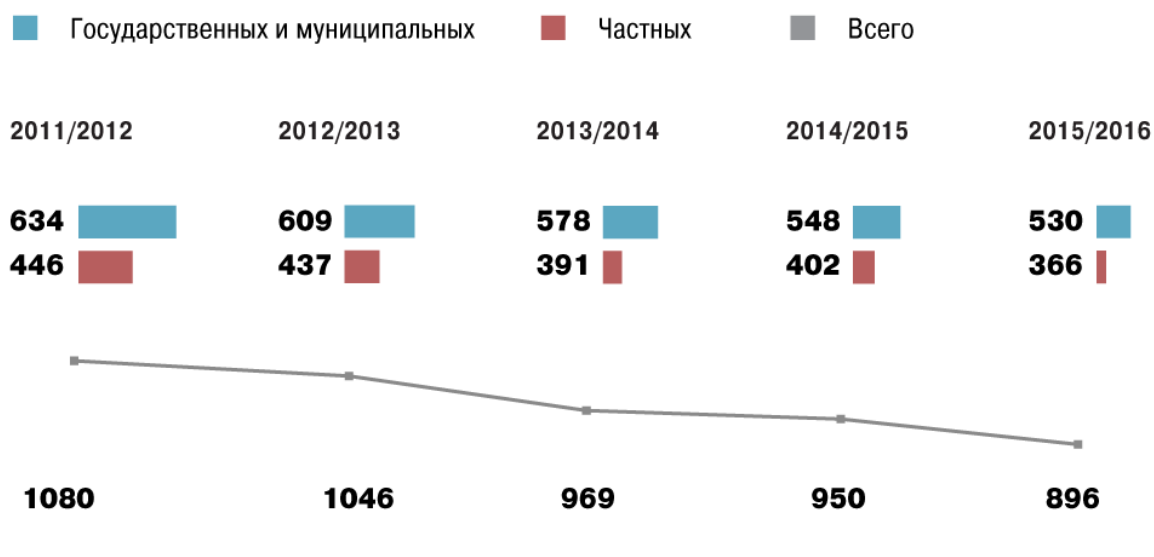
The table presents central quantitative characteristics of the system of higher education. Highlighted red is the number of higher education institutions which show signs of inefficiency. As we can see, the starting point of 167 institutions was the result of the first monitoring. The second monitoring was forecasted to identify 139 inefficient institutions, the monitoring of 2014 – 111 institutions, etc. until in 2018 there were forecasted no inefficient institutions. As we remember, the monitorings were introduced as a means of identifying inefficient institutions which would then be reorganized by mergers as a key instrument. Thus we can conclude that cutting down the number of universities with the help of mergers has been a planned action of the government. Reducing the number of universities by adding the weak ones to the strong ones was seen as one of the means of optimizing and enhancing the efficiency of state higher education institutions and enhancing the quality of higher education.

It is possible to state that both monitoring and roadmap of 2012 have provided an impetus for the first massive wave of higher education mergers in Russia. As a result, the number of the universities in Russia decreased from 1080 in 2011 to 896 in 2016. The data provided by the

Federal State Statistic Service (Rosstat) demonstrates that the number of state universities has changed from 634 in 2011 to 530 in 2016 (see the graph below). Such quantitative change became possible due to a number of means, including mergers of smaller universities with the bigger ones.

КОЛИЧЕСТВО РОССИЙСКИХ ВУЗОВ
(НА НАЧАЛО УЧЕБНОГО ГОДА)

ИСТОЧНИК: РОССТАТ.

■ Государственных и муниципальных   ■ Частных   ■ Всего

2011/2012	2012/2013	2013/2014	2014/2015	2015/2016
634	609	578	548	530
446	437	391	402	366
1080	1046	969	950	896

In October 2015, the Ministry of Education and Science of Russian Federation announced an open competition for higher education institutions for the financial support of their development programs. The background for the competition was talented school graduates favouring bigger universities in bigger cities rather than their "home" universities; the absence of strong scientific and research centers aimed at regional research; and the absence of drivers of positive change in city and regional environments (Arzhanova et al., 2017). The goal of the competition was the selection of development programs aimed at creation of flagship universities with the purpose of social and economical development of Russia's regions. The participants of the competition had to be higher education organizations which had already gone through merger or were in the process of it; federal universities and higher education institutions of Moscow and Saint-Petersburg could not take part in it since federal universities pursue other goals, namely enhancing international competitiveness of Russian universities. Other requirements to the development programs (apart from merger as a tool of reorganization) were the length of the program (not less than 5 years) and program's contents – it had to provide actions for modernization of educational, scientific, innovation and research activities, human resource

development, modernization of the university administration system and modernization of technical and socio-cultural infrastructure.

There have been 15 universities which applied to participate in the contest, out of which 11 applications have been approved. The universities have presented their programs at the official meeting of the Committee on the implementation of development programs and received their funding. As it has been required, all 11 universities have been reorganized through mergers, overwhelming majority of which took place in 2016.

In November 2016, the Committee has announced the second competitive selection of university development programs. The main requirement of the previous competitive selection – reorganizing through merger – has been lifted. Such decision can be explained with the major change in the Ministry of Education and Science: in August 2016 the Minister of education Dmitry Livanov (who initiated mergers of higher education institutions in Russia) was released from his position, and Olga Vasilieva became the new Minister of education. At the meeting of the Federation Council Committee on science, education and culture, she stated that the Ministry of Education and Science had to discontinue the process of higher education mergers. She also clarified that the Ministry would concentrate on the results of the existing mergers, study and analyze them. Nevertheless, part of the universities who has applied to take part in the second competitive selection was those who had already merged. In April 2017, the results of the competition were announced: the development programs of 22 universities were approved and the universities received the flagship status. As a matter of fact, there have been 86 universities who provided their programs of development which showed a growing interest of universities in participating in the competition.

As the result of mergers happened during 2013-2017, the number of universities and their branches decreased from 2390 to 1393 (according to the official statistics of the Ministry of Education and Science). If we call the period of 2013-2016 the first wave of mergers, and the period of 2016-2017 the second wave of mergers, we can regard the first wave as state-organized and the second one as voluntary.

Although the Minister of Education in 2017, Olga Vasilieva, has announced that mergers of higher education institutions in Russia had to be put on hold, the reorganization of the system of Russian higher education has not stopped, and the number of universities is still decreasing (from 1393 in 2017 to 1279 in 2019 according to the official statistics of the Ministry of Education and Science). Furthermore, in 2018 the Ministry of Education and Science itself was reorganized – it was divided into the Ministry of Education which resolves the issues of pre-school, school and vocational education, and the Ministry of Science and Higher Education which is responsible for university-level education. Mikhail Kotyukov, who has become the

Minister of Higher Education, has not addressed the issue of mergers of higher education institutions. On January, 15 2020 Dmitry Medvedev (at that time the Prime Minister) has announced that the whole body of government should resign. A week later the names of new ministers were announced – Valery Falkov became the new Minister of Higher Education. Since he has taken up his duty in January 2020, he has not yet addressed the issue of higher education mergers.

5 Analysis of results

After presenting our findings in the previous chapter, we would devote this chapter to analyzing them and answering the research questions of this study.

Research question 1: Are there particular problems to which mergers are attached?

The state-organized mergers of 2013-2016 were used by the government as an instrument of achieving the goal of enhancing universities' efficiency. The government developed the criteria of efficiency and evaluated the existing higher education institutions according to them. The official documents (i.e. the roadmap) signify that reducing the number of universities was planned; efficiency monitorings were used as a prerequisite and mergers as the instrument of reorganization. First and foremost, such measures were aimed at reducing the number of private higher education institutions – the lack of state control over them has led to educational programs of a very low quality. At first, private higher education institutions were reluctant to go through monitorings, but with the help of authoritative power of government they got involved in that process. As a result, the number of private higher education institutions decreased from 919 in 2013 to 527 in 2016 (according to the official statistics of the Ministry of Education and Science). As opposed to private institutions, whose reaction to being recognized as inefficient was to close down, state higher education institutions chose to reorganize when faced with the same situation. Before the first wave of mergers in 2013, there have been 1471 state universities (including their branches); in 2016, the number of state universities decreased to 1056 (the official statistics of the Ministry of Education and Science). The inefficient branches of higher education institutions were rarely reorganized and most of them were closed. In contrast, the inefficient "head" universities preferred to merge with their efficient partners.

The second wave of mergers was aimed at creating strong universities in the regions of Russia. Mergers were not obligatory since participation in the competition was voluntary, but those universities whose mergers and development programs were approved, received financial

support from government. At the same time, universities annually went through monitorings which still recognized inefficient higher education institutions which had to be reorganized. As a result of both monitorings and the competition, the number of universities decreased from 1583 in 2016 to 1393 in 2017 (the official statistics of the Ministry of Education and Science).

If we would analyze how problems and solutions (mergers) are presented in the policy documents discussed above, we may notice that at first mergers were to solve a "Russian" problem, namely eliminating the number of ineffective institutions. As it was mentioned above, in the 1990es due to the overall crisis in the country, the government lacked control over education and this is when a great number of private universities appeared. Students opted for private institutions when they failed to gain access to the private ones. Thus private universities earned money from students who wanted to get the desired higher education, usually paying little attention to the quality of education they provided. At that time also, many state higher education institutions started to open branches in other cities which also differed in quality from their head universities. When in early 2010 the discussions of low quality of Russian higher education reached their peak, the government introduced monitorings as an instrument of discovering those institutions which needed to be reorganized. Merges then were listed among the possible solutions to the problem of eliminating ineffective universities. The underlying logic of mergers between effective and ineffective institutions was that while merging to an effective university an ineffective university would have to adopt the features of the first and thus the two of them would become a bigger and effective institution. If we would analyze this situation in the framework of Christensen's approaches to understanding change (2007), we can suggest that such rationale for mergers can be explained through instrumental approach: the number of ineffective universities had to be eliminated and mergers were chosen as one of the ways to do it.

In November 2012 annual monitorings were included into a governmental program of Russian Federation "Development of Education" for 2013-2020. The program was aimed at improving the quality of Russian education with regards to the changing needs of society and improving the role of the youth in innovation and socially-oriented development of the country. The approval of the program was followed by the roadmap which was discussed above. Now mergers were seen as means of enhancing the quality of higher education in and improving the network of state higher education institutions. The roadmap did not provide any reasoning on why mergers were expected to improve quality of education; neither did it explain how they were supposed to do it. In terms of Christensen's approaches to understanding change (2007), such rationale can be argued to be in line with a myth version of institutional perspective: in the desire to reach some state (in our case it is the higher level of quality) higher education

institutions may merge because merger has become an attribute of a successful educational environment.

What we have called a second wave of Russian mergers, were mergers driven by the state competition for the status of "flagship universities". The competition was aimed at establishing strong universities which would contribute to the well-being of a region where they are located. Again, the documents do not provide any information on why merger was mandatory and in what ways a university which had been trough merger could improve the state of actions in a region. We would again argue, that such attention to mergers can be explained by a myth version of institutional perspective (Christensen et al., 2007) – if some great universities in the world were created with the help of merger, mergers of Russian higher education institutions may make them successful too.

As we can see, Russian mergers were driven by different motivations at different periods of time. If at the beginning mergers were imposed in order to eliminate the number of inefficient universities, after some time they were applied as an instrument of improving the quality of higher education and contributing to a greater state of Russian regions. And if in the first case the rational for mergers was not hard to decipher, the latter cases raise more questions of why and how mergers could improve Russian higher education.

Research question 2: What is the status of mergers as a policy solution compared to other policy instruments?

After we have examined the official documents relevant for this study (the program of development of education, the roadmap, various orders and decrees), we can conclude that the vast majority of the instruments of the program described in rather diffuse ways. Since the program was developed by the Ministry of Education and Science before it was reorganized into two separate ministries, it was aimed at all levels of education (pre-school, school, vocational, higher and further education) and consisted of several subprograms dedicated to different levels. Each of the subprograms had its own aims and objectives; our priority was to study the subprogram devoted to the development of higher education. The term "merger" was used in the subprogram four times, all in the context that the network of Russian higher education institutions needs to be optimized and reorganized with the help of mergers among other ways. It is of significance to note that those "other ways" are never specified in the program. In other words, the program states that there are several ways in which higher education institutions can be restructured but names only mergers as one of them.

In the roadmap which followed the program the term "merger" is used two times, again in the context of developing the network of Russian higher education institutions by means of

mergers among other ways. Again, those "other ways" are not specified in the roadmap; it is also not clear how exactly mergers can help improve the system of Russian higher education.

Neither the program nor the roadmap explains the choice of mergers as an instrument of developing and improving Russian higher education. The reasoning might have happened during the meetings when the adoption of the program was discussed but none of it is put into the texts of the documents. We might suggest that there have been used the international experience of mergers. In fact, one of the instruments of raising the international competitiveness of Russian universities, also listed in the program, is "5-100" project which is aimed at helping Russian universities enter world university rankings. The board of the project is international – among the Russian higher education researchers, experts and policy-makers it consists of Philip G. Altbach (USA), Malcolm J. Grant (Great Britain), Koenraad Debackere (Belgium), Weifang Min (China) and Lap-Chee Tsui (Hong Kong, China). Since this project is also a part the "Development of Education" program, it is fair to suggest that international experience of mergers might have been taken into consideration.

In the roadmap mergers are listed among the means of enhancement of the network of public higher education institutions, alongside with annual monitorings of higher education institutions' efficiency and modernization of licensing and accreditation of educational programs of higher education. If accreditation and licensing of educational programs are instruments of controlling quality, annual monitorings are instruments of controlling universities' performance, mergers then are instruments of restructuring higher education institutions based on the results monitorings and accreditation – the three of them are supposed to be interconnected and thus enhance the quality of higher education.

As far as the second wave of mergers is concerned, mergers there were used as a criterion of participation in the competition. The competition was aimed at identifying strong universities which would benefit the region where they are located; those universities who wanted to take part in it had to merge with another higher education institution. The official regulations of the competition do not explain why it was significant for the universities to merge but it contained some quantitative indicators which, we can suggest, would have been impossible to achieve but for mergers.

6 Conclusion

The main driver of this study was to find out what kind of problems mergers were expected to solve in Russian higher education. In order to do so, we first studied the research

literature on mergers and their history and identified the problems that they can potentially solve: improving quality of teaching and research, reaching economies of scale, eliminating duplicative programs, improving university's competitiveness, international attractiveness and cost efficiency, etc. Some of these problems have been later discussed in detail.

Then we have examined another element of policies – instruments – based on "NATO-scheme" of Hood (1983). We have learned that mergers present an example of organizational tools but can also adopt features of other categories of policy instruments because in most cases policies imply the interconnected use of instruments.

In an attempt to explain merger rationale, we have chosen to apply approaches of Christensen et al. – namely instrumental and institutional approaches. After analyzing the findings of the current research, we came to the conclusion that at different periods of time, the approach to merger motivations was different – when it had to solve the precise problem of cutting down the number of universities – the approach was instrumental; when the problems were rather diffuse (improving the quality of higher education) – the approach was institutional (the myth version of it).

The data that we have gathered allowed us to identify two waves of mergers in Russia. The first wave of mergers was state-induced and was aimed at enhancing universities' efficiency which in its turn facilitated the improvement of quality of Russian higher education. The second wave of mergers was voluntary and was seen as a prerequisite of building strong universities in the regions they are located in.

The governmental program "Development of Education" for years 2013-2020 seems to have come to an end. Yet there have not been made any final reports on whether the program was successful, whether it has met all the suggested outcomes and whether such great number of mergers has been beneficial for the system of higher education.

The project on flagship universities was also supposed to come to an end in 2020. So far there has not been released any final statements whether the creation of flagship universities by means of mergers has reached its goal of socio-economical development of Russia's regions.

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