Culture Management Specificity at International Universities: On the example of International Black Sea University in Tbilisi, Georgia

Manage successfully culture, and the culture will manage the business.

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Abstract

Organization culture of higher education institutions is present in leadership, administration and management of the institution and is influenced by external social and environmental factors. The culture also is closely linked to the goals, values, and mission of the organization and the criteria by which to measure organization success. The purpose of the article is to analyze how an International Black Sea University is effectively trying to implement dominant culture within various nationalities and functional groups, such as, students, lecturers and administrator groups. The article seeks to answer the following questions: What is the policy and strategy of the multicultural University in creating its dominant culture? How is the culture managed and maintained? Which groups participate in creation process of the organization culture in the course of time? The research focuses on a study of a single phenomenon, as it explores the culture of one particular university. An ethnographic approach has been chosen for the present qualitative study which basically relies on qualitative methods including a long-term observation and interviews.

The article deals with the many aspects of University culture management, studies some factors, and mainly the organization's vision, that help the staff turn into a single unit. IBSU, like other multi-national organizations, experiences difficulties in establishing coordinated initiatives in culture management. The university has to meet the expectations of the different groups and subgroups of its clients, such as, students, professors, executives, government, and society. Each of these segments requires a particular management to persuade and stimulate them to share the University's dominant culture. Universities are directly and heavily affected by political and socio-economic changes in the region. .The core values IBSU culture is based on are: equity, integrity, equality, tolerance, peaceful co-existence, respect and appreciation extended to representatives of minorities, strong leadership, struggle for change and innovations to achieve high quality in education. In the era of globalization the main goal of each international university should be a development of individual cultural model which will distinguish it from others..

Keywords: organization culture, cultural vision, culture management, university policy, values, traditions, effects of the organization culture, IBSU case

Introduction

Organization culture of higher education institutions is a rather complicated issue extensively discussed by researchers for the last two decades (R. Kilmann, et. al.) Though the definitions differ considerably, the researchers agree on the following: organization culture is a shared philosophy, ideologies, feelings, assumptions, expectations, attitudes, norms and values. (Lunenberg, et.al. p.60). Most definitions contain the characteristics which taken collectively reflect and give meaning to the concept of organization culture. These are: observed behavioral regularities, norms, dominant values, philosophy, rules, and feelings. Organizational culture has its roots in sociology and anthropology; it is often linked to organization climate which has a direct influence on organization effectiveness. The complexity of the concept of organization culture is determined by the reality that it is closely interceded with other theories in education administration, including motivation, leadership, decision making, communication and change; it should be interpreted within the context of open-systems theory, and is being characterized by input, transformation process, output, external environment, and feedback. (Lunenberg, et.al. p.60). Thus, the organization culture is present in leadership, administration and management of the institution and is influenced by external social and environmental factors. The culture also specifies the goals, values, and mission of the organization and the criteria by which to measure organization success.

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One of the major reasons for the increased interest in culture is that "it has aided understanding of what goes on inside organizations when different subcultures and occupational groups must work with each other" (Schein, p.12). In other words, culture analysis highlights subcultural dynamics within organization, and according to E. Schein, it has become more relevant to the analysis of broader national and ethnic interrelationships as more organizations, and particularly international universities find themselves working with other nations and cultures (Schein, p.13).

The main goal of the present article is to analyze the organization culture of international universities, emphasizing their particular characteristics. University is a large organization, and accordingly, subcultures emerge within the dominant culture. The International Black Sea University (IBSU/the University), a case under consideration, is an average-size private university implementing dominant culture within various nationalities and functional groups, such as, students, lecturers and administrator groups. The article seeks to answer the following questions: How does an international university create its dominant culture? How is the culture managed and maintained? Which groups participate in creation of the organization culture in the course of time? To what extent do the changes in country policy, economy, society and technology affect organization culture?

Methodology: The study focuses on a study of a single phenomenon, as it explores the culture of one particular university. An ethnographic approach has been chosen for the present qualitative study which basically relies on qualitative methods including a long-term observation and interviews. The study of the problem has been conducted with wide lenses in an open field.

According to Carl Steinhoff and Robert Owens, "[o]organization culture is a root metaphor of an organization…. It does not describe what an organization is (?) like; it describes the essence of the organization itself" (adapted from Lunenberg, et.al. p.72). The culture of the IBSU is actually its essence, embodied in the university policy, values, traditions, communications, in leadership and management style. The specificity of organization culture can be found in every aspect of university life.

The International Black Sea University, a multi-field higher education and research institution, was founded in 1995 by Turkish and Georgian sides. The Founders created the philosophical basis and outlined primary goals of the University, laying the foundation of the organization culture. Promotion of friendship and cooperation between two nations - Georgia and Turkey, as well as with the international community are primary aims of the University. Its other goals are: to establish open system, ensure quality education, academic freedom in teaching, learning and re-search, guarantee equity, integrity and equality prohibiting of all forms of discrimination. The University promotes the ideals of democracy and humanism aimed at development of a civil society; it endeavors to satisfy the students' requirements for proper higher education; to rise a new generation of researchers and create favorable conditions for them; and to prepare the students for trustful and friendly relationships between the nations. The role of successful management of organization culture is to assist the university to achieve excellence in education in order to be competitive on the international market. (Internal Regulation, pp.5-6)

Besides the University's overall culture, there are subcultures practiced by different subgroups. First, there are differences between the formal culture, which consists of ideal philosophy, and the informal culture, which consists of the actual day-to-day behavior of organizational members. Second, differences emerge among the various functional groups in the University, such as students, lecturers and administrators.

Once the cultural vision is outlined, the University starts looking for a proper strategy which will support its effective implementation. The University leaders, sponsors, and stakeholders bear the responsibility to support and promote the University culture. The process of socialization of staff, employees and students helps to solidify the acceptance of the values which involves several process: selection of employees, reward and control, adherence to values, consistent role models, and others (Lunenberg, et.al. p.65). University culture also influences on employees' performance and organizational effectiveness.

Universities are complex organizations with a unique set of features. Unlike many profit-making organizations, universities have a few distinctive characteristics that need to be analyzed as they play a dominant role in creating the culture of the educational institution; for example, a decision-making process is more complicated because of multiple goal standards and diverse services requirements. The complexity of culture management at Universities raises many questions. What are some of the most proven approaches to successful culture management of the Universities?

Staff alignment: Staff acting as one mind. For the educational institution, staff alignment is particularly important because it creates a healthy climate for the students who should feel the unity of ideas, approaches and strategies among the academic staff, and also between administration and academic staff. What factors turn the staff into a single unit? First and foremost it is the organization's vision, central to collective success. It should be encouraging, motivating and shared by the staff; the vision should also be long-lasting raising passionate enthusiasm among staff

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members (Maclenan, 24). IBSU is committed to rendering international standard education to the students, and also to promoting the ideas of tolerance and peaceful coexistence between the nations. A holistic approach to the University values is evident at all levels, and is supported by the management by regularly offering to the staff and the students an opportunity to participate in international forums and exchange programs; by inviting professors from oversees universities and sponsoring international journal publishing; also by organizing cultural programs including country visits, concert and exhibitions.

As Gulnara Diasamidze, IBSU Prof. of Humanities in her interview says, "the academic staff should be in pace with on-going changes which means we should work hard on our self-development. We continually have discussions with our colleagues, sharing knowledge and experience concerning the professional problems raising in our everyday life. The text-book written by me for my students who study business Russian language is actually intended for strengthening dialogue among the students of different nationalities". The feeling of being a part of a team which encourages the progress of its members is one of the most vivid specificities of the university culture. The above-mentioned text-book was sponsored by the University which had a twofold goal: to supports research activities of its staff, and to offer to the students the publications based on the University's fundamental principles.

IBSU, like other multi-national organizations, experiences difficulties in establishing coordinated initiatives in culture management. Those difficulties are mainly credited to the factors typical for the international universities. They are as follows:

a. To achieve its primary goal the IBSU has to provide value to different groups of their potential clients: the students – whose primary goal is career-preparation (BA, MA programs); executives – who seek further professional training and education (PhD, training sessions, seminars, workshops); government and society –expecting research results undertaken by university staff members (scientific grants and programs); and finally, exchange students and overseas universities - expecting fruitful cooperation with IBSU. Each of these segments requires a particular management to persuade and stimulate them to share the University's dominant culture.

b. University student population differs in terms of nationality, race, religion, class, and ideology; therefore, the difficulties emerge at cultural management level.

c. A coordinated initiative to cultural management of the staff with diverse origin is also quite complicated. In addition, the University professors are experts and they expect to have an academic freedom in teaching and research and keep autonomy within the limitations set out by the government.

d. Universities are directly and heavily affected by political and socio-economic changes in the region. IBSU is particularly vulnerable to those changes. For example, in the first years of its establishment some political party representatives in Georgia tried to damage the University image. Economic hardship directly affects the University's sustainability because some customers cannot pay the fees, -- a key source of financing. For example, after August 2008 conflict, the University experienced a decrease in students' applications mainly because the regular incomes of the population dwindled. Crucial shifts in politics also negatively affect on its stable development. Democratic governments throughout the world extend wide support to international educational centers. This is also true in our case. Democratic government in 2003-2013 showed wide support towards the first truly international university founded in Georgia and identified the importance of its mission for Georgia, as well as for Black Sea region in the process of development of partnership among countries in the neighborhood.

e. Rapid technological development has had positive but also some negative effects on University culture. One aspect of the university culture is, for example, an existed definite pattern of relationship between student and professor which is based on mutual appreciation, respect and trust. There is a threat that the students' heavy reliance on internet sources might lead to a devaluation of the teacher's role in the process of knowledge acquiring. A student who considers the internet sources as a substitute to the information delivered during lectures subconsciously starts to devalue the role of the lecture. The availability of learning-aid instructions in the internet is another opportunity for a student who seeks the ways to independent learning.

f. One of the basic values considered by the University – is integrity, which now occupies a top position in the hierarchy of values. Students' heavy reliance on internet sources often limits development of the process of analytical thinking and limits their creative approaches. Unlimited number of the essays and interpretations, critical evaluations and solution to the different problems which can be found in the internet in all academic subjects often thrust students to commit dishonesty, to copy and paste the material, or adapt it according to their needs. Plagiarism has never ever been as common among the university students as it is now. The level of plagiarism is even higher among international university students, and the main reason is that they are proficient in different foreign languages and can easily translate and adapt materials available in internet in the language other than official university language of instruction. These circumstances make the teachers' role as an evaluator even

more complicated. It is not easy to evaluate an individual student's progress, to identify the student's needs and to provide adequate help. Fair evaluation and judgment have always been the core issue for the University, and it is under stress today whilst the lecturers face dilemma of fair assessment of the students' achievement.

The students' fraudulent activities are also motivated by the strong competition among the students, as well as by the financial losses they incur when they fail to pass exam in the subject. Nowadays, when one of the major problems for the university education is a critical thinking and decision-making skills development among students, the strategies for its achievement should be re-considered and new approaches should be elaborated. Organization culture of the university is expected to think how to address this rapidly growing problem.

g. Technological advancements have a profound influence on students' choice nowadays. Affordable and easily accessible distant-learning programs take the students from commonplace universities to better ones. Technological advancement is one of the crucial challenges of the 21st century which dictates to the universities to enhance the culture of the organization which positively reflects cultural diversities and create aesthetically more attractive, comfortable environment. The above-listed peculiarities typical for international university culture management make its decision-making process even more complicated in compare with other types of organizations.

The Effects of the Organization Culture

Culture management influences the selection process of employees, as well as the evaluation, control, and reward systems of the organization. During job interviews, personnel managers try to find out whether a candidate demonstrates the characteristics which would best fit into the University culture. From this point of view, it is quite understandable why the preference is given to the job applicants who have been involved with the organization as former students, trainers, or employees.

Some of the cultural specificities of IBSU are:

A. Flexibility. The University is inclined to perpetual experimentation. It responds instantaneously to the reforms going on in the country to stay competitive in a local market, and at the same time, it keeps the pace of change considering the rate of progress in higher education worldwide. A good example which demonstrates the University's bias towards action is a preparation for the accreditation administered by the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia in 2013. The University administration together with the aca-

demic staff undertook rapid changes to meet all the requirements. Subject syllabi were modified, academic programs were adjusted to the new policy, teaching methods were adapted, and learning outcomes were analyzed in a new way. The accreditation process which was successfully accomplished revealed that the University is able to adapt to the change and, at the same time, it can uphold present valuable practices and prove the significance of its policy and strategy. A successful completion of the accreditation process was a demonstration of University culture, at what time its personnel showed themselves as goal-oriented, hardworking, productive, flexible, and communicative, able to respond to the challenges effectively.

"During the accreditation process I presented to the commission our programs and supported them with adequate explanations. In some cases I had to persuade the head of the commission in the appropriateness of our policy and practices concerning some problematic issues, says Professor Shioshvili, Dean of Humanities and Education, in her interview. In critical situations IBSU staff demonstrates that its members can actively participate in the decision-making process, trust each-other, and can achieve consensus in difficult situation, which indicates to the good culture management of the University.

B. Effectiveness achieved through academic staff. One of the distinctive features of the university culture is that it seeks ways to improve staff morale. High productivity of the University is strongly associated with shared decision-making and multi-level management. This policy opens the door for creative thinking and ground-breaking initiatives. The University staff is unique in many ways: the lecturers are generally highly knowledgeable and educated, they create the university image and are held in respect both by students and wide community. They are actively involved in research process and have first-hand information about the students' needs. Academic staff addresses the problem management process with the high sense of responsibility. The IBSU culture incorporates the principle of encouraging academic staff for wider participation in management of academic issues, as well as decision of some administrative problems closely linked with the university success. Academic staff of the international universities including IBSU is rather diverse in terms of nationality, race, gender and culture which makes it only more sophisticated and challenging. IBSU leadership encourages participatory decision-making practices to increase effectiveness and raise productivity of the organization. A good example of this policy is the presence of university academic boards, functioning at faculty and administration levels meet on regular basis on fixed days and discuss both current problems and general policy issues. Idea-sharing, peer-teaching, equal participa-

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tion in teaching-learning process is practiced at all levels of management. The University leadership implements culture of care, so called "family type" relationship is advocated in which professors and lecturers are viewed as an asset through which the high effectiveness of the organization is achieved. One of the examples when the administration shows respect towards the staff is when it celebrates the birthdays of the staff members, or inviting them to visit universities and historical places in Turkey and in Georgia. This enhances friendly relationship and helps to overcome the problems of cultural diversity among the staff members. The above mentioned approach is the best example how the culture management affects positively on the overall performance of the University.

C. Prioritizing customers. Being close to the customer who dictates direction of further development is the basis for University success. One of the specificities of the higher education institutions is that its customers that encompass students, parents, government and society at large, not only "buy" the university product but also participate in, and monitor the "production" process. International universities like IBSU have to consider the needs of its international students and observe their satisfaction. To achieve this goal, IBSU regularly gets feedback from the students through questionnaires set up by quality department. The aim of the questionnaires is to study the students' opinion about the quality of teaching-learning process, about university policies, and services offered to the students. The university pays particular attention to the students' claims regarding their lecturers; when the students argue about any problem, be it academic, organizational or ethical, the University administration studies each case scrupulously, so that the students' interests are always protected. Though the University rules are strictly observed and the students have to carry out their part of responsibilities stipulated in the contract, the proper management of the client-oriented culture ensures healthy and friendly atmosphere. Client-oriented approach is witnessed by numerous extracurricular activities sponsored by the university, such as, cultural and sport events, charity events, excursions in Georgia and Turkey, and others. IBSU was the first university in post-Soviet Georgia which tried to come closer to its customers – not only students, but also parents, government, and society. The University, which represents an open-culture institution, not only influences but is also influenced by the external environment.

D. Sharing culture – is one of the core values the University organization culture bases on. University name suggests it is founded to share the culture of different nations living in Black Sea region, forming a mosaic culture. Mutual respect and appreciation among Turkish, Georgian, Azeri, Russian and students of other nationalities is demonstrated through various activities organized by the University, such as, contests in different subjects, concerts, charity club activities, and sport events. The success of IBSU culture management is obvious as it is reflected in stable development and positive image of the University. In the result, today IBSU has been recognized by Georgian society, as well as by Turkish and international communities as being steadfast, persistent, and committed to development friendly relationship between nations.

Conclusion

Multiculturalism should be reflected in organization culture management which means that when mixing the cultures right balance between them should be achieved. There is a threat that international universities functioning across the world will soon become "identical" because they are based on universal values and norms which govern global higher education. The core values IBSU culture is based on are: equity, integrity, equality, tolerance, peaceful co-existence, respect and appreciation extended to representatives of minorities, strong leadership, struggle for change and innovations to achieve high quality in education; these and other principals are also common for international universities. In the era of globalization the main goal of each international university should be a development of individual cultural model which will distinguish it from others. Today, International Black Sea University, representing a mosaic of different cultures, is a well-recognized brand which continues its stable development following the principals defined by the founders to serve its most noble purposes: education, progress and friendship among the nations.

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