

# **The Transformation of Education in Russian Universities: Trapped Between Soviet-Academic and State-Market Logics**

## **Research Overview**

This study examines how globally circulating higher education reform models interact with historically established institutional configurations in Russian universities. Drawing on 50 expert interviews, it identifies two competing logics — Soviet-academic and state-market — whose interaction produces a trap of competing logics, with layering as the dominant mode of change.

## **Purpose of Study**

Across diverse national contexts, governments have adopted reform agendas repositioning universities as engines of innovation, international competitiveness, and economic growth (Dee et al., 2023). Yet when globally circulating reform models are adopted within specific institutional environments, they do not simply replace existing arrangements but are reshaped by them, producing hybrid configurations that may diverge substantially from original policy intent (Bleiklie & Kogan, 2007). This dynamic is particularly pronounced in post-Soviet higher education systems, where universities inherited a common institutional model — centralised, vocationally oriented, institutionally separated from research, and explicitly charged with the ideological formation of students — that continues to shape organisational practices and professional norms well beyond the Soviet period (Frumin & Platonova, 2024; Saltykov, 2008).

Among post-Soviet systems, Russia offers an analytically compelling case. Since the early 2000s, within a system characterised by a high degree of state regulation and centralisation (Smolentseva et al., 2018), the government has launched successive reform initiatives: accession to the Bologna Process, the creation of federal and national research universities, performance monitoring systems tied to funding decisions, and most recently the Priority 2030 programme requiring universities to adopt strategic positioning, project-based governance, and financially self-sustaining models (Platonova et al., 2019). This sustained reform pressure, directed at an organisational infrastructure still bearing core features of the Soviet model, makes the Russian system a setting in which the encounter between a globally informed reform agenda and a historically distinct institutional environment is especially pronounced.

The study focuses specifically on the transformation of educational activities within universities, since reforming teaching and learning is widely argued to be a key lever for broader institutional change (Wissema, 2009). The research question is: What institutional logics underpin the transformation of education in Russian universities, and how do they shape organisational practices?

## **Research Methods**

The study employs the institutional logics perspective (Thornton et al., 2012), which conceptualises society as an inter-institutional system whose orders — the state, the market, the profession — provide actors with material practices, values, and assumptions for organising activity. To analyse modes of change produced by competing logics, the analysis is complemented by the theory of gradual institutional change (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010), which distinguishes displacement, layering, drift, and conversion. Following methodological recommendations for higher education research, logics are identified at the field level through empirical analysis rather than deduced from societal ideal types (Cai & Mountford, 2022).

Data were collected through 50 semi-structured expert interviews (Bogner et al., 2009) conducted online, averaging 40 minutes each, with university-level administrators (vice-rectors, institute directors, educational strategy officers) and academic leaders (deans, heads of educational programmes) across multiple Russian universities. Sampling followed a purposive, criterion-based logic to capture variation across institutional positions and organisational settings.

Analysis followed thematic analysis (Terry et al., 2017) combining pattern-inducing and pattern-matching strategies (Reay & Jones, 2016). Inductive coding identified recurring practices, conceptions of educational purpose, governance arrangements, and value orientations; emerging categories were then compared with theoretical constructs from the institutional logics literature.

## **Results and Discussion**

The analysis identified two competing institutional logics shaping the transformation of education in Russian universities: a Soviet-academic logic rooted in disciplinary specialisation, paternalistic relations with students, and the cathedra as the locus of governance; and a state-market logic grounded in flexibility, project-based management, and the educational programme as the unit of organisational coordination. Their interaction produces persistent contradictions across organisational and value dimensions.

A central finding is the emergence of a trap of competing logics, in which neither logic prevails because each is sustained by distinct institutional supports. Building on Besharov and Smith (2014), the analysis identifies a mechanism of reciprocal shielding between organisational structures and value orientations that the compatibility–centrality framework does not fully capture. As a result, transformation unfolds primarily through institutional layering (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010), whereby new practices are introduced alongside existing ones, producing formal compliance with reform agendas but limited substantive change.

The study makes three contributions. First, it specifies how competing logics interact within organisations through reciprocal shielding. Second, it identifies the conditions under which layering becomes the dominant mode of institutional change. Third, it shows that the content of competing logics in higher education governance is historically contingent: the Russian case reveals a configuration in which reform is opposed not by a liberal-professional academic tradition, as documented in Western European and Anglophone systems, but by a state-socialist institutional legacy. The findings carry direct implications for evidence-based reform design in centralised higher education systems — aligning with the conference’s emphasis on bridging local institutional realities and global reform visions.

**Keywords:** institutional logics; university transformation; educational reform; post-Soviet higher education; qualitative methods

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