



## **Introduction to special issue: “Merger revisited: international perspectives on mergers in higher education”**

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This special issue concentrates on a phenomenon in higher education that has attracted much attention world-wide over the past two or three decades and has now come back on the policy agenda – merger. Merger as a policy issue has received a great deal of scholarly attention, a significant reason being because of the way national governments have used mergers and other forms of consolidation to initiate systemic restructuring of higher education. Many countries have been affected by such change – Canada, Great Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Hungary, Vietnam, New Zealand and Australia to name a few. Higher education in South Africa is now undergoing significant transformation with its government demanding fewer, larger and more effective and efficient universities that are designed to better meet specific national needs in the post-apartheid era.

A variety of different models and mechanisms have been used by higher education systems in many countries to achieve restructuring and increase levels of institutional collaboration. Drivers of these efforts have been many and varied but particularly important have been pressures to:

- increase efficiency and effectiveness, especially in coping with rapid and substantial growth in student numbers which in turn brings heavier demands on institutions;
- deal with problems of non-viable institutions and institutional fragmentation;
- widen student access and implement more broad scale equity strategies;
- differentiate course offerings to cater for greater student diversity and to improve the quality of graduates; and
- increase government control of the overall direction of higher education systems, especially to ensure that higher education institutions serve more directly national and regional economic and social objectives.

In many cases, restructuring efforts have formed integral parts of major expansion and adjustment as relatively small and elite systems of higher

education have moved to mass higher education. In this context, the dominant trend has been to move from relatively small and often highly specialised institutions towards fewer, larger and more comprehensive institutions, and from single site and single campus to multi-site and multi-campus institutions.

As will be seen in some of the articles that follow, mergers can take any number of different forms, from loose affiliations at one end of the spectrum to tightly integrated models at the other. In turn, the particular form of a merger is likely to have a major influence on the merger process, the kinds of difficulties likely to be experienced in bringing different types of institutions together, the kind of structures likely to emerge and the degree of success of efforts to integrate the partner institutions. The most common forms of merger can be portrayed as voluntary and involuntary, consolidations and take-overs, single sector and cross-sectoral, twin partner and multi-partner, similar academic profile ('horizontal') and different academic profile ('vertical') mergers. Many of these types and the issues arising are picked up in the articles that follow.

Hatton's case study of a single sector merger between former colleges of advanced education to create a new regional university in the state of New South Wales, Australia, portrays a bold and successful experiment in Australian higher education since the major higher restructuring of the system in the late 1980s. Strategic, purposeful leadership from the top is seen to have played a key role in moving the new Charles Sturt University from an originally designed federated structure to a 'decentralised integrated' model. How this was achieved given the geographical and structural challenges presented is an interesting story.

Also set in Australia, Mildred's article concentrates on the period following Australia's major restructuring of higher education which culminated in the creation of the Unified National System (UNS) in the late 1980s, effectively ending the binary divide. How in 1991 five institutions in the state of South Australia – two universities and three colleges of advanced education – were reduced to three and integrated into the UNS is the key focus. The major impact of institutional merging was on the single sector merger of the three colleges leaving the two universities largely unscarred. Mildred describes the process as a 'painfully slow path to reform'.

Transformation of the Norwegian non-university college sector by government edict in 1994 is the focus of Kyvik's article. Vertical mergers were the order of the day in this context. While in many countries reform of higher education systems resulted in breaking the binary divide between universities and non-universities such as was the case in Australia and the UK, in Norway creation of the new college sector led to creation of a binary system. To what

extent the reforms met with original government expectations is a particular focus. Academic and administrative staff at the state colleges and key policy-makers in the ministry and other state agencies provided input into this study. Not all the envisaged reforms are seen to have been met.

Another article set in the context of the restructuring of the Norwegian colleges is Norgård's and Skodvin's. It presents a fascinating case study of the newly merged multi-campus Telemark College which was formed from a vertical merger of four colleges with markedly different academic programs – engineering, health, teacher training and university-type programs of a regional college. The merger process, the major challenges that were faced and the impact of these are the key foci. The authors provide an interesting theoretical analysis of the cultural, structural and geographic factors which are described as having the greatest impact.

Cultural factors loom large in Harman's article which is set mainly in the Australian context. She concentrates on culture conflict and the human dimension of mergers, especially the challenges that confronted institutional leaders in trying to create integrated communities from the welding together of campus cultures that were historically and symbolically uncomplementary. Instances are provided where very different organisational and academic cultures collided, consequently becoming a potent and disintegrative force. From the cases depicted it is clear that where culturally different institutions are brought together, expert leadership is needed in order to keep damaging culture conflict to a minimum and to develop within the newly created institution new loyalties, high morale and a sense of community.

The human dimension is also the focus of the next article by two South Africans, Hay and Fourie. Many universities are struggling to survive in the current South African higher education scene and pressure to create fewer and larger institutions looms large on the government agenda. In this context and concentrating on the likely merger of three institutions in the Free State Province, Hay and Fourie portray the perceptions of staff in the institutions that will be affected directly by these changes. The importance of considering the fears and the psychological, technical, personal and financial needs of people in any merger is a strong theme.

From the perspective of a participant observer, a Canadian university Registrar on a work exchange program at the University of Western Sydney, Curri's article studies the administrative outcomes in New South Wales universities since Australia's UNS was established in the late 1980s. A key aim is to extract lessons learned from mergers in that state that would assist policymakers interested in increasing efficiencies in higher education in Nova Scotia. The University of Western Sydney, set up as a federated model, although now moving towards tighter integration, is seen to represent a good

example of how policy can be circumvented in order to maintain the *status quo*. In this context the policy of voluntary restructuring is seen to be more perception than reality.

In taking some major international studies of merger to task, Lang's article argues that mergers are merely an evolutionary form of 'inter-institutional cooperation'. In other words, various forms of cooperation, including merger, are part of 'a single evolutionary continuum'. He attacks the imprecision with which terms such as 'merger', 'federation' and the like are used and prefers to talk instead about the lexicon of inter-institutional cooperation. The article concludes on directions that inter-institutional cooperation might take in the future.

Whatever we choose to call it, merger is one of the most significant events an institution may engage in. In fact, for some institutions, merger may mean that they cease to exist, at least in their pre-merger form. In both the educational and commercial worlds, there are few 'true' mergers. The more common practice is that one institution takes over another institution. Moreover, few if any mergers are painless. In the literature on mergers it is generally agreed that it can take up to ten years for the wounds to heal and for the new institution forged from previously autonomous identities to operate as a cohesive and well integrated whole. This may be one reason why it takes so long for many of the efficiencies expected of merger to appear. The negotiations leading up to merger can be long and protracted and those individuals and groups who feel that they have lost advantage because of the merger may continue their opposition long after agreements are formalised.

No institutional leaders or system policy-makers should contemplate merger lightly. But financial and/or political imperatives may make merger inevitable. The articles presented here clearly demonstrate that there is no one best way to bring about merger. However, they also present a wealth of information and informed judgement about the various social forces that should be taken into account when contemplating merger and what appear to be the most appropriate actions to take under particular circumstances. We hope this special issue will be of interest to both general scholars researching organisational change and the practical policy maker concerned with institutional and system transformation.

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