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Challenges of University Mergers as Experienced by Finnish Academic Staff (0227)

Rationale

Various global, European, and national developments have promoted reorganization within the Finnish higher education system. The purpose is to generate (inter)nationally a more competitive network of higher education institutions, enhance the quality of research and education as well as identify and recognise strategic areas in research and education. Similar developments have also taken place in other higher education systems in Europe during the last decade (see Kyvik, 2004; Liefner, Schätzl & Schröder, 2004; Teichler, 2006). Bleiklie and Kogan (2007) point out that "the notion of the university as a republic of scholars" is shifting "towards the idea of the university as a stakeholder organization". This is what Mohrman and colleagues (2008) call as an emerging global model of the research university.

Previous studies on university mergers show that the consolidation of organizational and institutional cultures (Kezar & Eckel, 2002) and management styles (Locke, 2007) of the merging universities plays a crucial role. Furthermore, a merger is dependent on the interaction of governmental macro-politics and institutional micro-politics (Sehoole, 2005) as well as geographical distance (Dahl Norgård & Skodvin, 2002), which thus create a specific merger context.

A successful merger requires the development of new structures and ways to work as well as an adaptation of novel ways of thinking from the whole academic community (Kezar & Eckel, 2003). The management of the university plays a crucial role in executing a merger and creating a new organisational culture (Kyvik, 2002; Eckel & Kezar, 2003; Sehoole, 2005; Locke, 2007). Institutional leadership must create a vision of the merged institution that retains the strengths of the merging universities but at the same time is responsive to external constraints. This visioning and communication process begins in the planning phase, well before the actual merger takes place.

For academic staff a merger can have both positive and negative consequences. It can, for example, enhance professional identity by providing better academic career prospects. As a consequence of reallocation of academic positions a merger may also create tensions between staff members. (Becker et al., 2004.) Hence, one of the main missions of university's management during the planning process is to reduce uncertainty by communicating openly on the aims and progress of a merger to staff and students (Ceryh & Sabatier, 1986; Sehoole, 2005) and providing opportunities for academic staff to participate in decision making (Becker et al., 2004).

Research aim, data and methods

The purpose of the paper is to describe how the academic staff of Finnish universities are reacting to mergers from the perspective of academic work and of teaching and learning.

The target group consists of four university mergers (in brackets is the number of universities involved): Aalto University (3), University of Eastern Finland (2), University Consortium of Turku (2), and University Alliance Finland (3). The last-mentioned is an exception, however, as the three universities that form the alliance will not actually merge but just enhance their cooperation and rationalize their activities.

The data consist of semi-structured interviews (N = 30). The interviewees were selected from various levels of university: from management to students. The data was analysed by means of content analysis. A document analysis was also conducted which results are reported in Ursin, Aittola, Henderson and Välimaa (2010).

Results

The interviewees raised several problems in a merger process. The key problems were:

- *Lack of resources to carry out a merger*; the interviewees especially highlighted the fact that a merger requires a lot of extra work which is not compensated in anyway.
- *Fear of loosing academic identity in a merger*; this was mentioned especially by the academics from small universities as they feared to be overtaken by the larger merging university. Losing 'own family' was thus a major issue for some of the interviewees.
- *Risk of deteriorating well-established teaching arrangements and methods*; the major threat was that a merger can easily mean a return to traditional teacher-centred mass lectures from student-based and interactive teaching and learning methods because in the mergers larger faculties and departments are encouraged but the teacher-student ratio did not improve.
- *Geographical distances between new campuses*; this worry applied especially to University of Eastern Finland in which the three campuses are very far away from each other with poor public transportation connections. ICT was regarded to be a solution for new teaching arrangements but several interviewees doubted whether ICT can fully replace face-to-face interaction with students.
- *Increase in bureaucracy*; several interviewees questioned the whole idea of a merger as their experiences so far had only been increased bureaucracy in the form of additional administrative work.
- *Problems in managing a merger*; those who were responsible for managing a merger process felt that they lacked experience of carrying out such an endeavour. Academics (researchers and teachers) and students on their part felt that the process was not managed properly and some interviewees even said that a merger was not managed at all.
- *Fear of loosing job*; few interviewees worried that in the long run a merger can mean reallocating resources so that less productive study programmes may be closed and people lose their jobs.

Conclusions

A key conclusion is that it is problematic to form a new and joint organisational and institutional culture when a new university is established as a consequence of a merger. The interviewees stressed the key role of management in forming a new culture but felt that quite often a merger was not transparently promoted. Decisions were rather made by a small group of people and not including the whole academic community to a merger process. Therefore, in order to create functional 'we spirit' to a merged university transparent and collective decision making are of crucial importance.

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