HANDLING MERGER PROPOSALS

Report of A Study Undertaken by Nigel Brown, Jane Denholm and Tony Clark

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1. Summary and Conclusions

This report is the output from a study which represents the first phase of a wider consideration by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) of structural change within UK Higher Education. The study was undertaken by Nigel Brown, Jane Denholm and Tony Clark. It is based on a combination of desk research and fieldwork - interviews with five sets of case study institutions - which was carried out between May and July 2003.

The central purpose of the study was:

> 'To identify those factors in the merger process that led some merger discussions to be abandoned while others led to implementation of the merger proposal through reviewing some recent merger discussions'.

The study was therefore about the genesis of the merger proposals and the processes adopted by different institutions to take forward consideration of those proposals, the difficulties that arose and how the processes helped or hindered the resolution of those difficulties. It is **not about whether proposals were well-founded or achieved their objectives**. This report is aimed both at institutions contemplating starting discussions on increased collaboration that might end in merger and at policymakers and funding councils.

The project began with a brisk review of relevant literature. Although there is a growing body of research into and writings on mergers in higher education, this tends to focus on evaluating the individual merger proposals in terms of their objectives and on determining whether mergers have achieved their objectives. Our research was about the process of bringing a merger proposal to fruition and the strategies and tactics used to achieve this. There is not a great deal of information in the literature about process and only those studies we found which were useful for this purpose are listed among the references at Annex D.

To this end we also employed empirical research through interviews with senior managers in four different sets of institutions with different experiences of merger processes, representing a cross-section of types, in terms of institutions and outcomes. The study was, however, confined to mergers between higher education institutions. We did not include any examples of mergers between higher education institutions and further education colleges although these have become more common.

We are extremely grateful to those staff who gave their time to be interviewed for the study as they provided valuable and new knowledge and insights which we could not have accessed through the literature or from simply reviewing media reports of the progress of the merger proposals. We asked about a range of issues including: genesis of merger proposals; arrangements for handling proposals; difficulties encountered; overcoming difficulties; reasons for aborting merger discussions; and current position where merger proposals were not pursued.

We had envisaged that the study would result in a list of 'dos and don'ts' which would be easily attributable to either successful or failed merger proposals, as appropriate. In the event, we found this not to be the case. We found that the same key themes and issues came up in most of the proposed mergers we examined

(abortive or successful). We have concluded that it is the combination in which these themes occurred, and their handling within the context of each merger that has determined the outcome. Thus, each merger proposal is unique and a subtle blend of issues and tensions requiring skilled handling.

The one factor, however, that comes out above all others, in determining the success of merger discussions, is the degree to which there are strong negative push factors forcing the merger. Such circumstances appear to be an incentive to overcome all other barriers. On the other hand, where there are no significant push factors to merger, a wide range of issues can be potentially deal breaking.

The case studies pointed to a series of key issues that need to be addressed in taking forward proposals, some of which, in the right (or wrong) combination, could be deal breaking issues. The main ones are:

- lack of trust or loss of trust that has been built up;

- the need for senior figures to be prepared to champion the merger proposals and provide real leadership

- perception of differences in institutional culture;

- changes in key personnel during the process;

- different academic standing of the two institutions, especially concerns about relative performance of the two institutions in the RAE – This is partially a concern about the potential financial impact and partially a reputational issue;

- finding the investment to meet the short-term costs of delivering the merger objectives and the relationship with funding councils;

- the position of the two heads of institution post merger;

- the name of the merged institution; and

- the legal basis of the merger.

The case studies also point to the conclusion that while the kind of processes identified above and successfully navigating the potential deal breakers are necessary conditions for successful completion of merger discussions, they are not of themselves sufficient conditions. The main issue from the list above is the degree of common understanding and trust between the key individuals in the two institutions and the personal chemistry or lack of it between those individuals.

We conclude that merger is such a time consuming and uncertain process that there is need for more in-depth research into the relationship between 'push' and 'pull' factors and the longer term benefits of merger that can be identified. This analysis should then be extended to examine the costs and benefits of apparently less time consuming alternative approaches such as the federal model adopted by the University of Surrey and Roehampton Institute and other forms of close collaboration short of merger.

2. Introduction and Background

<u>Introduction - the Genesis of the Study</u>

Since the 1970s with the designation of the polytechnics and the substantial restructuring of teacher education there has been relatively little policy interest in the institutional structure and shape of the UK higher education system apart from such one-off events as the granting in 1992 of university title to the extant polytechnics. There has been a steady trickle of 'bottom-up' initiatives with universities absorbing small specialist colleges or further education colleges - 'acquisitions' (Harman 2000) - but until recently relatively few examples of mergers between two universities or between a university and a large general college of higher education- 'consolidations' (Harman 2000) - in England, Scotland or Wales. (See list at Annex B) Nevertheless, as noted by Ramsden 2003 in Patterns3, there has been a net reduction from mergers in the number of institutions of 19 or over 10% of the total since 1994-95 after allowing for those new institutions that have joined the sector

Unlike in other countries (e.g. South Africa and Australia) neither the Government nor its agencies (the funding councils) in England or Scotland have sought actively to promote mergers believing the 'proposals for mergers between institutions should ideally be led by the institutions themselves'. This view is represented by the statement from the Universities Funding Council (UFC) Scottish Committee in 1991 that 'unless there are exceptional or extreme circumstances, the…funding body should not normally take the initiative' (UFC Scottish Committee 1991).

It is further indicative of the extent to which this laissez faire approach has predominated that the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (the Dearing Committee), despite being charged with commenting on the 'purposes, **shape, structure, size** and funding of higher education', devoted little time to this issue and the word 'merger' did not appear in the index to the report (NCIHE 1997, our emphasis). This omission was not wholly surprising given the short timetable for the Committee's work and the predominant concern about the future funding of higher education in the UK.

The climate has been changing. In 1999 the now Chief Executive of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) said:

> ' the structure of British higher education is now considerably out of line with its newly-acquired functions and purposes' (Newby in Brown R 2003)

The Higher Education White Paper, *the Future of Higher Education,* DfES 2003 proposed a restructuring of the higher education system in England along functional lines with a small number of research intensive universities with the remainder concentrating on teaching and knowledge transfer, but with a collaborative model to support research strengths in non-research intensive universities. This proposed approach has forced individual higher education institutions to reconsider their missions within a more market-oriented environment and to examine the potential of strategic collaboration to assist them to meet their aspirations. In this environment it is likely that merger proposals will emerge more commonly and the time is therefore ripe to analyse the factors which help to determine whether a merger proposal will be implemented or not.

On its establishment as a longer-term policy think tank for higher education, the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) identified institutional merger as one of the areas where it could provide a valuable service for the sector by analysing existing experience and identifying the potential difficulties that can arise in merger discussions. This study is the first outcome from that work.

Background

Collaboration and merger[1] have become watchwords as institutions face up to a wide range of external challenges and opportunities. The Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) in its evaluation of its Strategic Change Grant identified three types of external drivers – policy, market and global/regional impacts

The three British funding councils have approached the issue of mergers differently:

- . The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) has always taken a proactive approach with mergers. From before 1997 it has been HEFCW policy to offer funding to encourage mergers and restructuring ;

- SHEFC inherited extensive guidance on mergers from its predecessor, the UFC Scottish Committee, and has itself issued a steady stream of guidance to institutions over the past decade. It has also been heavily involved in advising Ministers on at least six higher education merger proposals, as well as conducting evaluations of past mergers. . For the first five years and several mergers, SHEFC policy was not to provide funding, on the assumption that savings would be generated as a result of the process. This policy changed in1997 with introduction of the SHEFC Strategic Change Grant and subsequent mergers have received substantial sums from the Council;

- HEFCE has, to date played a low key role in mergers HEFCE has tended to treat each case on its own merits, although our own research indicates that prior to 1997 HEFCE's attitude was similar to that of SHEFC. In 1997/98 HEFCE introduced the Restructuring and Collaboration Fund and the Council has used the fund as a discretionary facility to support development projects, including merger projects, that institutions might not fully fund from their own resources. HEFCE very recently published extensive draft guidance on how institutions should handle proposals. (HEFCE 2003).and will finalise the draft in the light of consultation.

HEFCE, SHEFC and HEFCW have therefore each had for some years a collaboration and restructuring fund to assist institutions both to explore and to implement options requiring change which could be described as strategic in nature. HEFCE recently commissioned an evaluation of its restructuring and collaboration fund (Evaluation Associates 2002) but of the 44 collaborative projects funded up to August 2001 only seven had involved institutional merger and all of these involved the merger of a large university or college with a small specialist institution. More importantly, neither this, nor the similar evaluation study conducted for SHEFC of its Strategic Change Grant

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[1] For the purposes of this study we would define collaboration as covering activities where there is pooling of resources to pursue agreed objectives but where ultimate control of those resources remains with the separate legal entities. Merger on the other hand requires the transfer of control to a single legal entity, either one of the existing entities or a whole new entity.

considered mergers in much detail and nor were they primarily concerned with process. HEFCW has not yet evaluated the use of its strategic funding.

Until the late 1990s most institutional mergers essentially involved the take over of small, sometimes vulnerable institutions by universities or large colleges and, in England, this included a small number of mergers with further education colleges. (See list of mergers at Annex B) These were mainly low profile. More recently there have been a significant and increasing number of mergers proposed between universities or between a university and a college of comparable size. These have been much higher profile with national as well as local interest. Within this media limelight there have been some cases where the merger negotiations have broken down, but others have proceeded.

This change probably reflects the increased pressures on higher education institutions making them face up to the possibility that they might not be able to survive in the long-term as a freestanding institutions and to look for the possibility of realising both enhanced positive benefits and economies of scale – a combination of 'push' and 'pull' factors.

The Purpose of the Study

The central purpose of the study was:

> 'To identify those factors in the merger process that led some merger discussions to be abandoned while others led to implementation of the merger proposal through reviewing some recent merger discussions'.

It is important to emphasise that this study was about the genesis of the merger proposals and the processes adopted by different institutions to take forward consideration of those proposals, the difficulties that arose and how the processes helped or hindered the resolution of those difficulties. It is **not** about evaluating the individual merger proposals in terms of their objectives nor of determining, where mergers have been implemented, whether they had achieved their objectives. Some difficulties that have arisen may have reflected inherent weaknesses in the proposal itself, but that is not the issue for this study. When we refer in this document to 'the success of the merger', therefore, we mean that the proposal came to fruition – the merger happened - not necessarily that the merger itself delivered its objectives.

This report is aimed both at institutions contemplating starting discussions on increased collaboration that might end in merger and at policymakers and funding councils.

For institutions it is intended to offer some key practical issues that managers should consider before being entering into a process that very clearly requires an extremely high level of energy and commitment from those most heavily involved and that has a large number of potential pitfalls. These issues need to be weighed in the balance against the longer term strategic benefits that merger may bring.

For policy makers and funding councils it is intended to offer two things:

- general information which can inform consideration of merger proposals in terms of helping to recognise the conditions where merger proposals are likely to be fruitful and to progress to implementation of the merger ; and

- some reflection on the processes for considering merger proposals, the pitfalls and the role of interventions by funding councils in bringing a merger to fruition.

3. Methodology and Sample Selection

Our approach was to combine a brief literature review with a series of case studies of recent merger proposals between two universities or between a university and a college of similar size. The literature review covered experience both outside the UK and across the countries of the UK, including existing material produced or commissioned by the Funding Councils on collaboration and merger. Our initial aim was to undertake six case studies: three where the merger proposal had been agreed (if not yet implemented) and three where merger discussions had broken down at some stage.

We drew up a long list of around nine possible merger proposals since 1994-95 of which five involved agreed mergers and four merger discussions that had broken down. The full list is at Annex A.

We initially approached six of the institutions listed, but several of those institutions that had been involved in abortive merger discussions did not wish to be involved in the study. The issue remained very sensitive for one or both parties.

As a result we have only been able to undertake one case study on a merger proposal that proved abortive against three were the merger has been agreed or has been implemented. The case studies that we have used are:

- University of Birmingham and Aston University;

- London Guildhall University and the University of North London (to form London Metropolitan University);

- Manchester University and the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST); and

- University of Salford and Salford College of Technology

However, an important finding from the case studies is that the same kinds of issues arise in almost every merger proposal and all or any of these mergers could have fallen over before implementation. In addition it is possible to use information that is in the public domain in some cases about why certain other merger discussions proved abortive and we have used this material in drawing up conclusions, although that is no real substitute for the wealth of detail that has come from the case studies.

In each of the institutions we met with senior managers who had been intimately involved in the process of taking forward the merger proposals. We were aware that the views of these managers would provide us with a perspective that constituted only a partial view of the merger experience of their institution. For the most part, the managers we spoke to were involved with the idea from conception and saw at least part of their role as being one of convincing others and steering the proposals through. Other stakeholder groups could, and would often, have had quite different views of the same process and the issues that arose.

Nevertheless, the vast majority of those we interviewed were well aware of where opposition to merger proposals had come from and the nature and root cause of that opposition. Even where they believed that opposition had been misinformed the interviewees were by and large able to reflect on its implications and how the issues raised by opponents or critical friends had been addressed in the merger process. We

believe that we have been able to gain some insight therefore into the wider views across the institutions concerned of the individual merger proposals and that we have, therefore, been able to reach a balanced view.

We used a standard framework of questions for the interviews which was sent to the institutions in advance of the discussions. This is attached at Annex C.

The issues covered included:

- genesis of merger proposals;

- arrangements for handling proposals;

- difficulties encountered;

- overcoming difficulties;

- reasons for aborting merger discussions; and

- current position where merger proposals were not pursued.

The framework of questions was not intended as a formal questionnaire and in the event it served its purpose as a framework allowing the flexibility to pursue leads arising from the answers to earlier questions.

4. Merger proposals – features and themes

The merger proposals that we examined for this study represented a cross-section of types, in terms of institutions and outcomes, but very early on in our work we found that the issues which arose that were considered to be important to the merger proposal succeeding or not, were very similar. We have categorised these for more detailed discussion under a series of themes below although, inevitably, many of the issues are linked so these categories are not always entirely discrete.

The main themes arising were as follows:

- genesis of the merger proposal;

- role of key individuals;

- stakeholders, including handling the media;

- processes;

- structures;

- culture and mission;

- trust;

- financial issues; and

- relationship with the funding council.

Genesis of the merger proposal

Mergers happen for all sorts of reasons and are generally a combination of both 'push' and 'pull' factors. As we have already noted, mergers and merger discussions amongst British higher education institutions have, in general, been voluntary. Harman and Harman observed that 'behind many voluntary mergers there is often external threat or some degree of government incentive, pressure or direction' (Harman and Harman 2002). They add that 'in the private sector, mergers and collaborations are usually a response to external threats or opportunities'. We have found that higher education institutions tend to behave like private sector institutions in this regard, holding on to their individuality and independence as long as possible and relinquishing these generally only when severely threatened or when the positive opportunities are significant. Annex B briefly records the nature of mergers and merger discussions among British higher education institutions since 1992.

The following examples from the individual case studies provide a flavour of the kind of considerations that lead to merger proposals:

- in the case of London Guildhall and the University of North London (UNL) it was clear that the highly competitive London higher education market played an important role in encouraging both institutions to think about merger – both in terms of opportunities to exploit as well as ways to survive;

- UMIST and Manchester University found that they shared a vision that the external environment favoured bigger institutions with broader and deeper

subject coverage and depth and shared an understanding that merger was a realistic option to achieve this;

- similarly Aston University and the University of Birmingham recognised the potential of merger to unleash the academic synergy of the two institutions;

- the University of Salford and Salford College of Technology wanted to exploit opportunities that neither could realistically pursue alone in nurse education which brought a third institution, the Northern College of Nursing and Midwifery from outside the HEFCE sector into the merger proposal; and

We concluded that merger proposals often, but did not always, originate from discussions to explore the possibility of increasing existing collaboration. The issue of merger often arose as a natural option to be considered along with others when institutions began discussions about closer collaboration. Very often such discussions were conducted at a very high level and formed part of the confidential element of merger discussions that is considered further below. The UFC Scottish Committee commented in 1991 that prior collaboration was:

> *'an advisable, almost necessary, prerequisite prior to both parties proceeding to full merger discussions. A demonstrable record of successful co-operation is…likely to create a much more amenable climate should the issue of full merger become an option…'.*

Subsequent merger considerations by SHEFC have always sought to establish the extent to which institutions have a track record in collaborative activity, prior to proposing to merge. On the other hand, the new draft HEFCE guidance does not place much emphasis on prior collaboration at all, although it does put emphasis on exploring alternative strategic options. This may perhaps reflect a new era where merger could be viewed more routinely as an option in rational response to radically changing external factors, as opposed to being seen as a major event, preceded and precipitated by a gentle and incremental culmination of collaborative activities.

However, as some of our case studies also illustrate, the suggestion of merger can also arise from institutions concluding that they will never be able to raise the necessary resources to fund desired new developments or realise key objectives without fundamental, structural change. These can be seen as examples of positive 'pull factors'.

Role of key individuals

The road to merger can be a long and difficult path. Harman and Harman observed that 'merger negotiations need strong, effective and creative leadership' (Harman and Harman 2002). Most interviewees agreed that leadership was key to bringing it off. Senior managers, and especially the Vice Chancellors or Principals, of both institutions must be fully committed to the merger in terms of the shared vision and objectives of the merger proposal. It is hardly credible to expect staff within an institution to take a merger proposal seriously if there is any evidence of a lack of commitment at the top of the institution. Harman identified 'a shared view of threat…and/or a shared vision' as a key factor in improving the chances of success of a proposal (Harman 2000). Ideally this level of commitment should also be shared by Chairmen of Councils or Boards of Governors and other key lay members.

At the same time, we were cautioned that, as the process may be long, there may be changes in key personnel during the process that can lead to complications if the new personalities clash or fit less well or if key individuals are less committed or have a different view of how the merger should look, or how the processes should operate. This point also relates to *Trust* (see below).However, it is also possible that the loss of a particular individual who is a potential blocker could free up the process

The position of the two heads of institution post merger was an important issue. There is also sufficient anecdotal evidence to suggest that this may be a reason that some proposals never reach even preliminary stages of discussion. A variety of solutions have been employed by merging institutions. Where proposals have been successfully implemented, it appears that the two heads of institution have agreed an approach and proposed the arrangements to their respective Councils/governors for consideration ideally at an early stage, although the timing may vary. It is clear also that if one or both is close to retirement this may be the catalyst needed to start the process, although it can also be a negative factor since the individual required to lead the process might be seen as having no stake in the merged institution. If one or other (or both) is not prepared to relinquish their position as head of institution this is a potential deal breaker for the whole proposal and will require imaginative and sensitive handling by the senior lay members of the partner institutions. Overall Vice Chancellors are powerfully placed to initiate and to make or break merger discussions.

Stakeholders

Merger proposals cause anxiety and uncertainty. The importance of communicating about the merger with all key stakeholder groups – governors, staff, students and communities, came through in the interviews as crucial to ensuring the success of the process. To some extent this point is already reflected in the literature on criteria, although governors have not been singled out as a group in any of the documents and the HEFCE draft only mentions staff (UFC Scottish Committee 1991, SHEFC 1994, HEFCE 2003). Interviewees were adamant that each of these groups needed attention.

As described, in *Process*, below, developing a merger proposal requires a series of tiered decision points. The process therefore requires managers to undertake a delicate operation of balancing the need to inform, to consult and to feed back and take account of views, with the need to steer and lead the project. In addition, interviewees pointed out that during the process, the views of some or all stakeholder groups could and sometimes did swing backwards and forwards, in favour or against proposals and aspects of proposals, so there was a need to keep taking the temperature of opinion, and seeking to influence it where necessary.

Whilst some pointed to the need for some confidentiality at the very earliest exploratory stages most, though not all, interviewees considered a spirit of openness and exchange of views to be important once a decision had been taken formally to move to the feasibility stage of considering whether merger was an option and vital once the decision to merge had been taken. These points are corroborated by Harman's findings (Harman 2000). Several interviewees also pointed out that the

honest answer to many questions will often be 'that issue remains to be resolved' which may be seen as evasiveness.

Institutions employed a range of routes to keep all stakeholder groups informed and to seek their views on emerging issues. In different mergers, different groups of stakeholders emerge as more or less concerned about the proposals. In some cases students have been opposed to the proposals because they identify strongly with 'their institution'; in others the administrative staff were clearly the most challenged by the proposals. However, because they were the most powerful voices within the institution and had key roles in the decision process through Senate/Academic Board and Council/Board of Governors, interviewees identified academic staff and members of Councils or Boards of Governors as the two groups which were particularly in need of careful convincing.

Several interviewees identified the central role of lay members of the University Council or Board of Governors. They will be called upon to pass on the assets, (including the institutional reputation) to a new, successor body and, as 'trustees' of the existing institution may therefore inherently be conservative in outlook. Where merger may necessitate dissolution of their institution, governors are particularly likely to need to feel fully convinced of the benefits before agreeing to it.

The selling of the merger proposal to the academic staff of the merging institutions was also considered to be crucial. So much of an institution's identity in terms of culture and core offer is a reflection of the characteristics of the academic staff that anything which may change this can be, and often is, seen as a threat. An academic at a newly merged institution said 'we are major players, not just pieces in the chess game' (Shaw, 2003). Each of the cases for merger made in our case studies contained a strand about strengthening academic provision. More than one interviewee commented that because their proposal to merge was academically led, managers were able to inspire their academic staff with a vision of a new institution. Furthermore, several interviewees said that the identification of a large unique **mutual** benefit - win/win - early on could help enormously in selling the proposal to stakeholders. Clearly the academic case for merger must be convincing in relation to teaching and research. It appears that the merger proposal between Imperial College and University College London. foundered because academic staff were not convinced by the academic case for merger.

For asymmetrical mergers, the identification of benefits to staff of the smaller institution – e.g. staff development opportunities, better research facilities and perhaps a more research-oriented culture (University of Edinburgh 1997, Heriot-Watt University 1998) – have been used to encourage merger, and possibly sweeten the perception of 'takeover' although this can be offset by fears on the part of staff in the larger institution about dilution and 'what are we getting out of this' and those in the smaller institution of 'swamping'.

Unsurprisingly, an important issue for all staff was job security. Harman points to 'guarantees given as soon as possible to staff about security of employment' as being an important factor in successful mergers (Harman 2000). Several interviewees reported that a commitment to a policy of 'no redundancies directly arising from merger' was helpful towards alleviating fears and achieving staff buy-in. Following three post-merger evaluations, SHEFC noted 'the commitment to such a policy is of great benefit to the process of merger' and recommended that future merging institutions considered its appropriateness to their own situation (SHEFC 1995).

Interviewees pointed out, however, that most people understand that such a commitment can only apply in the short-term and more importantly it can lead at senior levels to contrived structures to find jobs for all concerned.

Handling local and increasingly national media interest was clearly recognised as an important issue. More than one interviewee recognised that if properly briefed the media could not only build up external stakeholder support for a merger proposal but also serve to counter internal rumours. On the other hand if the institutions did not engage effectively with the media the papers would tend to bolster opposition.

Processes

All interviewees reported a need to establish, early on, processes for dealing within institutions and between institutions.

Within institutions: interviewees impressed upon us that senior mangers must also expect and be ready to accept from the outset the enormous (some said overwhelming) commitment of time and energy that would be involved beyond their existing day jobs to explore, develop and implement the merger proposal. They needed to recognise that merger is not an event and the whole process, pre- and post-vesting day, could take, they predicted, a minimum of five years. Several interviewees pointed out that a dedicated project manager to progress chase and co-ordinate the administration in each institution was ideal, particularly once the decision in principle to merge had been taken, although this had not always proved possible and it therefore fell to one or two senior mangers to take on this role.

Between institutions: the importance of appropriate joint structures was impressed upon us. All had established a series of joint committees and all had ensured, despite the relative sizes and status of the institutions involved, that all joint groups and committees had equal representation from both institutions and comprised individuals of equal seniority from both institutions. These joint groups were able to take forward the detailed work and also to support the Senates/Academic Boards and Councils/ Boards of Governors of the merging institutions to deal with the issues.

Most institutions also established a joint group of Council members or governors who were able to meet relatively frequently to oversee the process and advise on strategic decisions. This was particularly important once the proposal to merge had been agreed by both Councils/Boards of Governors since it was then important to establish a Shadow Board for the merged institution to have the authority to take key decisions prior to the full legal transfer of authority from the existing Councils/Boards.

Some interviewees had found that making use of an independent 'honest broker', with no personal commitment to one institution more than another, to lead discussions/chair key groups was very helpful in securing neutrality and promoting trust between partners especially during the early stages.

The merger process necessitates a series of key decision points and the synchronicity of meeting of the key decision making bodies was mentioned as important to keeping up momentum. To minimise the impact of rumour and maximise rational decision-taking, one of our case studies ensured that key Governors/Council decision meetings of the two partner institutions took place at the same time - separately but simultaneously.

Interviewees considered that developing a merger proposal required a series of, probably three, phases, tied to decision points. The initial phase – where the proposal was little more than an idea to be tested (often among other forms of strategic collaboration) – is often conducted informally and confidentially and findings confined to a small group, or even just the two Vice Chancellors. Thereafter, if it decided that merger is feasible, there is a more widely-publicised exercise within the institutions where merger becomes an openly acknowledged option and finally, after a decision to merge has been taken, there is the preparation of the merger proposal and wide consultation on key decisions and its operational aspects.

Managers reported that the timing of, and manner in which, the 'bombshell' of the results of phase 1 is dropped onto stakeholders are very important. In one of our case studies a hitch in the process meant that information was released to the various stakeholder groups asynchronously, resulting in some governors finding out about the proposals in the press, rather than officially and formally at the same time as everyone else. This caused alarm, bad feeling and scepticism, all of which had to be overcome before progress could be made. Phase 2, ending with the decision to merge or not to merge, requires consultation at a strategic level and some high level work on potential benefits (including a business plan for the merged institution) and outline structures, whilst phase 3, following the decision to merge, requires consultation on operational matters and formal negotiations on certain issues.

Even the most carefully considered processes will not satisfy everyone. Managers of the two institutions in one case study considered that extensive and regular communications were made with staff and other stakeholders to ensure they were kept informed throughout phases 2 and 3, as well as holding a more formal trade union forum for airing and discussing issues. Nonetheless, a senior academic writing in The Higher referred to 'the abuse of the merger to pursue a managerialist agenda and the limited and grudging response to consultation' (Cammack 2003).

Informal opportunities for contact came through from the interviews as important to generating proposals in the first place, to playing a role in smoothing the path of merger . All interviewees who commented considered that there is a role for dinner and drinks not least in establishing the necessary rapport between colleagues from the partner institutions to navigate a long and often difficult process and establishing relationships with external stakeholders. One of our case studies reported using the functions and corporate events surrounding a major sporting event in the city as an opportunity to entertain key stakeholders and at the same time enlightening and informing them about the merger proposals.

Structures

Mergers require compromise about the way things will be done in future and whose policies and practices will be adopted in each regard (or whether to adopt a new third way). Some of these issues are about 'flags and emblems' and others are more practical but we found that the potential shape of the new institution raised important issues upon which proposals could flounder.

Branding and reputation are very important in higher education and stakeholders can be very attached to the name of their institution. In addition, the proposed name of the merged institution could be interpreted as an important symbol of who 'won' in

the merger discussions. In asymmetric mergers the smaller institution is often simply absorbed, name and all, into the larger one. This is not so simple with more equal institutions. Harman identified 'a decision as early as possible about the name of the merged institution' to be one of the key factors in enhancing the chances of success of a merger (Harman 2000). However, fearing its potential to sidetrack more substantive matters, one of our case studies deliberately took this issue out of the discussions until all of the other issues had been resolved and the decision to merge was made.

Similarly, the legal basis of the merger was a critical issue. In ostensibly 'equal' mergers, any hint in the legal process that one of the institutions is taking over the other is likely to lead to impasse, if not well handled. Double dissolution is one way through this difficulty, though it is the most dramatic and complex option and at least in the case of one merger we considered, presiding over the actual dissolution of their institution was a step too far for some stakeholders.

Culture and Mission

Differences in institutional culture can give rise to issues relating to the character of the institution post-merger but can also surface during the process itself. Particular issues identified from our case studies were the way in which senior mangers in each of the institutions communicated with staff about progress with the merger proposals and the development of proposals for new management and departmental structures that needed to reflect the differing practices of the two institutions.

A key issue was the perceived relative academic standing of the different institutions: Concerns about relative performance in the RAE can give rise to formidable opposition from academic staff, even if these concerns are ill-founded. Although there is clearly a financial angle to such concerns, they are predominantly about institutional reputation within the overall academic community

Perception is important – one of our case studies might appear to external commentators as a merger of two similar types of institutions but managers reported in interview that the two had very different styles and characters and from an internal perspective some staff clearly considered the two to be very different claiming 'different histories, structures, practices, cultures and problems so uniting the two is a potential minefield' (Shaw 2003). Harman and Harman also concluded that 'even when institutions that seem to be highly compatible and able to achieve profitable merger synergies, they often possess underlying cultural differences that can seriously impede integration' (Harman and Harman 2002).

Trust

Trust plays an important role in all aspects of merger - trust and good relationships between key senior people in an institution can be the basis for the germination of the idea of merger as several of our case studies demonstrated.

All interviewees mentioned how important trust was to ensuring a smooth passage for the merger proposal process. This may be partly why previous experience of collaboration can be so helpful. Interviewees impressed upon us that potential

merging partners have to earn, or have earned, and build trust and have to nurture it because it cannot be assumed that it will take care of itself. Personnel changes can cause it to be lost and incidents of this were cited. Managers warned that merging institutions needed to be aware that there might be changes in key personnel during the process which could lead to the loss of trust that had been built up although such changes could also remove potential sources of mistrust.

Financial issues

A central part of the merger process is the development of the business case for the merger and the associated financial projections. These are essential to enable the Councils/Boards of Governors to take the necessary decisions to agree the merger and to satisfy the funding council of the sense of the merger and to support any bid from the restructuring fund. HEFCE's latest draft guidance on mergers offers a good deal of advice on the various elements in developing the business case and drawing up the business plan (HEFCE 2003).

The interviewees in our cases studies were clear that the development of the business plan and the associated financial projections were amongst the most time consuming of the whole process. There are at least four kinds of financial issues that may need to be addressed in the process of considering a merger proposal:

- the need to bid for investment funding from the funding council and/or other external stakeholders. This is usually to release some of the projected benefits of the merger as quickly as possible. HEFCE in its latest draft guidance has made clear that the material that it requires in terms of investment appraisal is likely to serve other potential investors as well. It is clear from our case studies that the availability of such external funding can be a major pull factor but if it is not available it can also be a deal breaker;

- the need to identify and justify additional short-term costs to make a bid for financial support from the relevant funding council's Collaboration and Restructuring Fund. Such costs include the need to align computer systems, the unavoidable costs of aligning conditions of service in the two merging institutions;

- both to make the case for initial investment by the funding council and to provide development funding in the longer term it is necessary to be able to demonstrate either or both recurrent savings or increased income compared to the do nothing option as a result of the merger. As some of the case studies have shown this can be difficult in the short term, especially if the institutions are committed to no redundancies as an immediate result of the merger; and

- the need to identify existing financial risks to either party through due diligence. Due diligence needs to cover both financial risks and legal risks. It is important to both partners to a merger that due diligence is undertaken by independent advisers. The kind of risk that can be identified by due diligence includes long-term expenditure commitments, unresolved disputes with contractors over payment, onerous lease terms and risks to occupation of major premises. Any of these could if serious enough throw out the financial

projections on which the merger proposal is based and ultimately scupper the merger proposal itself.

More practically, mergers across between pre- and post-1992 raise issues such as different superannuation scheme membership of academic staff in the two types of institution.. There is a financial issue about transferring from the Teachers Superannuation Scheme (TPS) which is not fully funded to the Universities' Superannuation Scheme (USS) that is. This was an issue in one of our case studies, but USS ruled that they were not prepared to accept a significant transfer in of staff from TSS and there was no transfer of staff despite Union demands. This issue also arose as a potential deal breaker in a merger consideration in Scotland in1993, causing the funding council to issue a circular to the sector stating that 'there should be no presumption on the part of institutions that the Council will meet any extra costs, including superannuation costs, incurred by merger' (SHEFC 1993).The NICHE (Dearing 1997) hoped that this issue might be resolved in due course by an increase in employer contributions to TPS, but the differential remains.

More generally the relative financial positions of the partner institutions was seen by the interviewees as an important issue in merger discussions. If one of the partners had current financial difficulties it was much more difficult to avoid the impression that that the financially stronger institution was somehow coming to the rescue of the other. This would almost certainly undermine the equal basis which appears to be so important to merger discussions.

Relationships with the Funding Council

Interviewees believed strongly that it was important to involve the Funding Council from an early stage to ensure that there was enough time to address and answer their questions within the timetable. This was especially important if funding was being sought to meet the transitional costs of the merger. Both HEFCE and SHEFC recommend 'early and regular contact' (HEFCE, 2003).

Several interviewees commented that detailed iterative dialogue with the funding council could lead to a tendency to 'load up proposals' by trying to envisage optimising all of the merger benefits in the initial proposal document. This resulted in unrealistic targets when a simpler, less complex document and plan would be a sounder base from which to start. Interviewees advised that merging institutions should avoid trying to achieve too many gains in the short-term, envisage merger as a long-term staged process and identify those few key objectives that are achievable in the short-term.

There were also concerns about the impact that the detailed scrutiny that HEFCE required both in terms of the time required by individuals already busy with the merger proposal to address all the issues raised and in terms of the nature of the relationship between autonomous institutions and the funding body. No one doubted that HEFCE had the right to expect properly argued and supported bids for funding and proper accountability for delivery against objectives. The concern was rather that some of what HEFCE required went beyond those requirements.

Timescale

Although in one of the case studies the institutions left themselves a large amount of time between the decision to merge and the actual legal transfer, most interviewees thought that the shorter the time scale between the decision to merge and the legal implementation of that decision the better. This minimised the chances of unforeseen changes in key people, limited the time for opposition to gain momentum and minimised the chances of external changes undermining the proposal. However to work the adoption of a short timescale requires good prior planning and a willingness to work initially with a minimum change position immediately post-merger.

5. Conclusions: key factors in success and failure

We had imagined at the outset of this study that a list of 'dos and don'ts' would emerge from the research which would be easily attributable to the successful and the failed mergers. This has not been the case. The same key themes and issues came up in most of the proposed mergers we examined (abortive or successful). The one factor, however, that comes out above all others, in determining the success of merger discussions, is the degree to which there are strong negative push factors forcing the merger. Such circumstances appear to be an incentive to overcome all other barriers. On the other hand, where there are no significant push factors to merger, a wide range of issues can be potentially deal breaking. The most important issues that are potential deal breakers in any merger, particularly if there are no specific 'push' factors, we have identified are:

- lack of trust or loss of trust that has been built up;

- perception of differences in institutional culture and failure to produce a convincing academic vision;

- the position of the two heads of institution post merger;

- changes in key personnel during the process;

- different academic standing of the two institutions, especially concerns about relative performance of the two institutions in the RAE;

- the legal basis of the merger.

- financial or legal liabilities (identified by due diligence);

- the availability of investment finance from the funding councils and external organisations to deliver key aims; and

- the name of the merged institution.

Although we were able to study in depth only a small number of cases, we are convinced that the sample size is not material. It is the combination in which these themes identified above occurred as issues, and their handling within the context of each merger that determined the outcome. Thus, each merger proposal is unique and a subtle blend of issues and tensions requiring skilled handling. Nevertheless, the case studies do in our view allow one to identify the key matters that need to be addressed in taking forward proposals and some of the pitfalls that can be encountered.

It may be significant in this context that in the case of at least one case study, both institutions had had previous experience of abortive merger discussions with other institutions. Is it possible that they had learned lessons from that earlier experience that they were able to use in subsequently making a success of it?

The case studies also point to the conclusion that while the kind of processes identified above and successfully navigating the potential deal breakers are necessary conditions for successful completion of merger discussions, they are not of themselves sufficient conditions. The issue which heads the list in determining the success or otherwise of merger discussions, is the degree of common understanding and trust between the key individuals in the two institutions, starting with the

Chairmen of Councils or Boards of Governors, key lay Members, the two Vice Chancellors ,the two Secretary/Registrars and other senior academic managers. This requires not only some personal chemistry between the key players in the two institutions but above all leadership of the highest order because it involves being able to say

> *'my duty to this institution requires in this case for me to overcome my natural loyalty and do everything in my power to ensure a smooth transition to merger with another institution so that the new merged institution can develop in a new and better way'.*

It is also abundantly clear from all our discussions that carrying through a merger proposal is very time-consuming for senior staff and lay members in the partner institutions. In addition the benefits are likely to accrue in the medium term rather than the short-term. Energy and commitment on the part of senior managers is therefore clearly crucial in seeing a merger process through to fruition.

The genesis of, and identified rationale for, a merger proposal is also key factor in its success. Where there are important 'push' factors, such as financial difficulties or a challenging external environment, there are incentives to overcome some of the difficulties and obstacles which might defeat a less 'necessary' merger and as one commentator has observed 'there is little evidence to suggest that, except where one institution is clearly failing, the advantages of mergers etc outweigh the disadvantages' (Brown R 2003)

It may therefore be that in practice 'deal makers' are as important if not more important than deal breakers . Where deal breakers can scupper a merger, dealmakers can ensure that it takes place despite the difficulties. We suggest, on the basis of the evidence we have seen, that deal makers are almost always negative push factors. Positive pull factors help cement mergers but do not appear to be enough in themselves to guarantee success. Even significant potential financial benefits were not enough to persuade the two institutions in one of our case studies to merge in the end. We conclude that where there is no impending push, almost anything else can be a deal breaker given the specific circumstances in which institutions find themselves because the push factors are insufficient to get them over the issues.

6. International Experience

We have reviewed the literature about institutional merger principally in two other countries - Australia and South Africa. To some extent the experience is different because in each of these countries merger has been politically driven. In Australia the driver was the Labour Government's radical reforms of higher education in the 1980s and 1990s. In this context mergers were to an extent imposed from above. In South Africa, merger has been seen as a way of dealing with the inheritance from apartheid of racially separate institutions and the need to integrate the different types of institution.

In addition much of the evaluation work has been concerned with whether or not the mergers achieved their original objectives rather than examining the process. In Australia for example many of the mergers were taken forward on the basis of State legislation against active opposition from the staff. Nevertheless one merger ultimately fell apart. The experience of this final round of mergers in Australia which was designed to complement the abolition of the binary line does allow support for the conclusion that negative push factors are more important than positive pull factors. In this case the negative push factor was the threat from the Government of financial penalties for those institutions that failed to pursue appropriate mergers. The Government had a very clear set of objectives that it wished to pursue in terms of the size and character of universities in receipt of public funding, including in particular bringing together research strong universities with modern institutions with a vocational emphasis. The Government push was sufficient in nearly all cases to overcome enraged opposition. Similar trans-binary mergers are now starting to be promoted in Germany because of fears about the 'isolation' of academic universities from the real world

Nevertheless despite these differences of culture and approach it is possible to draw the following general conclusions from our evaluation of the literature for Australia and South Africa and consideration of developments in Europe:

- the Government has to set a clear national strategy and objectives for higher education which have the broad support of institutions and society;

- the arrangements for distributing public funds should place a premium on the effectiveness of individual institutions in meeting the national strategy and objectives of higher education. If necessary, the arrangements should include special injection of funds to meet direct merger costs;

- where necessary, mergers are drawn up by individual institutions to enable institutions to meet effectively the national strategy and objectives; and

- Effective but sensitive leadership is essential, and especially so where institutions with very different academic cultures and traditions are involved

These conclusions are consistent with our own findings, bearing in mind the differences in the political framework within which universities operate.

Annex A: Long List of Merger Proposals Considered For Case Studies

Aberdeen University/Robert Gordon University

Bath University/University of West of England

Birmingham/Aston University

Bradford University/Bradford College

Brunel/West London Institute

Imperial College/UCL

London Guildhall University and the University of North London

Manchester University/UMIST

Salford University/Salford College

Annex B: Mergers and potential mergers among British higher education institutions 1992-2004

Mergers and potential mergers among British higher education institutions 1990-2003			
Institutions	**Date of proposal/formal discussions**	**Nature of proposal**	**Outcome**
Strathclyde University/ Jordanhill College of education	?	Large university and small teacher education college	Successful
Glasgow Polytechnic/Queen's College Glasgow	?	?	Merged
Paisley University/Craigie College of Education	1992	Large university and small teacher education college	Merged
Dundee University/Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art	1995	Large university and small prestigious creative arts college	Merged
Glasgow University/St Andrew's College of Education	?	Large university and small teacher education college	Merged
Heriot-Watt University/Scottish College of Textiles	1998-99	Large university and small, rural, general higher education college	Merged
Edinburgh University/Moray House Institute of Education	1998-99	Large university and small teacher education college	Merged
St Andrews College of Education/ The University of Glasgow	1999-2000	Large University and small teacher education college	Merged
Aberdeen University/Dundee University/Northern College of Education	2001-2002	Large universities and small teacher education college on two sites in two different cities	Merged
Aberdeen University/Robert Gordon University	2002	Two large and complementary universities in the same city	Decided not to merge but to continue strategic collaboration
Brunel University/ West London Institute of Higher Education	1994-95	Large general/teacher training college and modest sized university	Merged
British Postgraduate Medical Foundation / Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine, Kings College London, University College London and Senate Institutes	1995-96	Part of the rationalisation of medical education in London	Merged

London University			
St Bartholomew's Hospital Medical School and the London Hospital Medical College / Queen Mary and Westfield College	1995-96	Merger of two freestanding medical schools with one of the major colleges of London University as part of the re-organisation of medical education in London	Merged
Winchester School of Art / the University of Southampton	1996-97	Specialist Art&Design College merged with a large pre-1992 university	Merged
Salford College of Technology / the University of Salford	1996-97	Large generalist College merged with geographically adjacent small technology focussed university also bringing in a major college of nursing and midwifery from the NHS	Merged
Royal Postgraduate Medical School and Charing Cross&Westminster Medical School / Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine	1997-98	Part of the re-organisation of London Medical Education	Merged
Institute of Psychiatry/Kings College London	1997-98	Part of re-organisation of London Medical Education	Merged
La Sainte Union College of Higher Education / the University of Southampton	1997-98	Small specialist teacher training institution with major pre-1992 university	Merged
Loughborough College of Art and Design /Loughborough University	1998-99	Small specialist Art& Design College with geographically adjacent technological university	Merged
United Medical and Dental Schools of Guy's and St Thomas's Hospitals / King's College, London	1998/99	Part of the re-organisation of medical and dental education in London	Merged
Westhill College/University of Birmingham	1999/2000	Large pre-1992University and small specialist teacher education college	Merged
College of Guidance Studies/ Canterbury Christchurch University College	2000-2001	Large General College with very small specialist college	Merged
University of Birmingham/Aston University	2000-2001	Large pre-1992 University and smaller pre 1992 university	Did not take place
Westminster College Oxford and Oxford Brookes University	2000-2001	Small specialist teacher education college and large post-1992 university	Merged

Loughborough University and University of Leicester	2000-2001	Large technological pre-1992 University and Pre-1992 University with medical school	Did not take place
Wye College / Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine	2000-2001	Small specialist School of London University with large multi-faculty School	Merged
North Riding College/ University of Hull	2000-2001	Small teacher education college with medium sized pre-1992 university	Merged
University of Bath/University of the West of England	2000-2001	Medium sized pre -1992 university and large Post-1992 University	Did not take place
Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine/ University College, London	2001-2002	Two large multi faculty , research strong schools of London University	Did not take place
Bretton Hall College/University of Leeds	2001-2002	Small teacher education college and large University	Merged
University of North London/London Guildhall University	2002-2003	Two Post-1992 universities in London	Merged
University of Manchester and UMIST	2004	Two Pre-1992 universities	Agreed to be implemented in September 2004
Bradford University and Bradford College	2004	Pre-1992 University and large mixed economy FHE College	Not now to go ahead
Welsh Agricultural College/University of Wales Aberystwyth	1994-95	Small specialist College with Pre-1992 University	Merged
Coleg Normal/ University of Wales Bangor	1996-97	Small teacher education College with pre-1992 University	Merged
Trinity College Carmarthen and University of Wales Lampeter	1998-99	Small teacher education College and small pre-1992 University	Did not take place
North East Wales Institute/ University of Wales Bangor	2004?	Generalist HE college and Pre-1992 University	Discussions suspended
University of Glamorgan/University of Wales Institute, Cardiff	2004	Post-1992 University and large General College	Not to proceed
University of Wales College of Medicine and Cardiff University	2005?	Pre-1992 University and Specialist freestanding Medical School	Likely to proceed

Annex C: Questions Used as Basis for Interviews with Staff from the Participating Institutions

Introduction

The questions below are intended to provide a framework for the interview discussions. The questions are deliberately crosscutting, but in the discussion it will be necessary to distinguish whether the issues in question related to particular aspects, for example:

- Teaching and learning
- Research
- Legal and constitutional matters
- Physical estates and infrastructure (e.g. IT)
- Issues relating to differences in the culture of the two institutions
- Management and Governance
- Financial issues

Questions for Discussion

1. Genesis of the merger proposal, **previous co-operation, and collaboration and previous competition**

Were the drivers for the merger proposal external and if so driven by national developments such as tuition fee policy or local developments such as opening up of new markets?

Or were the drivers internal such as prospective personnel changes or recognition of financial vulnerability?

Did the two institutions have any formal or informal co-operation or collaboration prior to the genesis of the merger proposal? Did this involve collaboration between academic subject departments in the two institutions in the same or closely allied subject area or collaboration between complementary subject areas to develop inter-disciplinarity?

Or did it involve collaboration in the provision of services such as library or computing facilities or in the provision of central services?

Were the examples of prior collaboration based on formal agreements between the two institutions? How widespread was such collaboration?

Were there any evaluations of the costs and benefits of existing collaborations undertaken or available to help inform the merger proposal?

Were there any areas where the two institutions were in direct competition prior to the merger proposal?

2. Arrangements for handling the merger proposal

What structures were put in place for taking forward the merger proposal in each institution and jointly between the two institutions? How were the university councils/board of governors involved and how were individual members of staff involved?

Were the arrangements effective from your point of view? If you were starting again now would you have sought to set up different arrangements for taking the proposal forwards? What would you have done differently?

.3. Difficulties encountered in the process including potential and actual deal-breaking issues

What difficulties did you encounter during consideration of the proposal? Had you anticipated these difficulties? Were there any anticipated difficulties that did not arise?

How many difficulties that did arise were in your view potentially deal-breaking issues?

Were there examples of difficulties arising from external (such as announcements from or processes dictated by the Funding Council) as well as from internal factors?

4. Mergers that were implemented: overcoming difficulties and potentially deal-breaking issues

Where merger proposals were implemented how were major difficulties and potential deal-breaking issues overcome?

Did it make it easier or harder to overcome difficulties when they were driven by external factors?

5. Reasons for abandonment of merger proposals

What stage had the discussions reached when the merger proposal was abandoned?

On what issues did the proposal founder? At what stage were these difficulties identified?

With hindsight could these difficulties have been anticipated and circumvented, and if so how?

Were there any benefits accruing from the merger process even though the merger proposal was not ultimately implemented?

Have there been any negative outcomes/ramifications for subsequent collaboration and more generally for the relationship between the two institutions arising from the abortive merger proposal?

6. Costs and Benefits of Mergers that have Proceeded

Have you put in place systems to measure how far the costs and benefits predicted for the merged institution have actually been delivered?

Have there been any unpredicted benefits or costs of the merger? If so, what are they?

With hindsight would you have done anything differently?

7. Where merger proposals were not pursued

Have you, despite the merger proposal not being pursued, sought to collaborate in a less formal way with the intended merger partner?

Have relationships between the two institutions changed in any other way?

Is merger still an option in future?

Annex D: Selected References

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