University Mergers:
The Implications for Students

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Abstract. The "human factor", i. e. conflicts and protests of students and employees, often becomes a key problem during and after university mergers. Those transformations, which occur under a reorganization and which are subjectively visible and important for students, are analyzed from the perspective of the theory of radical organizational changes in this article. Four cases of Russian university mergers are considered. The clusters of key "formal" and "informal" changes for students who studied at universities during their reorganizational process were identified based on the data obtained in individual and group interviews with students. The changes in the subjectively recognized prestige of the university diploma and the potential status of students as future graduates of a particular university were the most significant ones from the students' point of view. At the same time, students hardly mentioned the content of the curriculum and the objective indicators of the higher education institutions' quality by discussing the benefits or losses associated with the reorganization. Students often noted the changes occurring in the educational process, formal and informal communication within the university, university culture and the "atmosphere". Based on the results of the study, it is possible to estimate the characteristics of the university, which students pay close attention to during the reorganization and which, therefore, have to be taken into account by planning and conducting university mergers.
Keywords: university mergers, amalgamation of universities, university takeovers, educational policy, organizational changes, student experience.

University mergers are quite common practice, implemented and analyzed in many countries: in Australia [Gupta, 1990; Harman 1991], China [Mao, Du, Liu 2009; Mok 2005; Zhao, Guo 2002], Romania [Andreescu et al. 2015], Spain [Delgado, León 2015], as well as in Scandinavian countries [Aagaard, Hansen, Rasmussen 2016; Kyvik, Stensaker 2013; Norgerd, Skodvin 2002; Ursin et al. 2010; Stensaker, Persson, Pinheiro 2016]. Several waves of university mergers and takeovers have also been carried out in the Russian Federation, their progress and results have been studied mainly in the context of the management of higher education systems [Klyueva, Klyuev 2010;

Melikyan 2014; Pavlyutkin 2014; Romanenko, Lisyutkin 2017; Salmi, Froumin 2013].

Initiation of university mergers is often used as an instrument in large-scale state programs. Their goals can be different: from higher education pay cuts to creating a network of highly rated integrated super-universities. The process of merging is a serious challenge for each university and requires a careful analysis of all the potential difficulties and opportunities. Among the most common problems that arise after university mergers, along with the transformation of the organizational structure or the distribution of funding, the researchers note the "human factor": interaction between staff members, who are different because of their university culture, criticism of reorganization, talebearing and subsequent conflicts among teachers and students from partner universities [Harman 2002; Norgerd, Skodvin 2002].

Students are rather seldom mentioned in the academic and analytical literature on university mergers and only as:

a) a source of issues—as participants in protests and conflicts caused by the reorganization [Aula, Tienari 2011];
b) a quantitative indicator that specifies intra-university changes [Melikyan 2014; Mathisen, Pinheiro 2016];
c) one of the arguments for the need for reorganization—for example, an amalgamation is described as a potential opportunity for a larger selection of study programs for students [Harman, Harman 2003; Skodvin 2014; Ursin et al. 2010].

At the same time, the experience and attitude towards reorganization of those students who studied at the time of university mergers have not become the subject of a special study yet. This article fills the gap to create the basis for managerial decisions under university mergers, and also to characterize the interests of students in modern universities through analysis of the situation regarding university changes.

1. The national context of the study of university mergers

The motives and principles of university mergers in Russia, as well as typical problems that arise, are similar to cases of university mergers and acquisitions abroad, hence the results of Russian studies can be extrapolated to some extent to other countries. Nevertheless, the management of university mergers in Russia has a number of features that complicate these mergers and determine the relevance of research on university mergers specifically concerning changes in student positions.

In order to identify the characteristics that are fundamental to the national context of the research, we analyzed several waves of university mergers in Russia: a) the amalgamation of post-Soviet specialty colleges for the creation of classical universities in the 1990s; b) the creation of federal universities in 2006–2012; c) the joining of higher

education institutions recognized by the results of the Monitoring of Effectiveness of the universities of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation as ineffective since 2012; d) the creation of regional flagship universities since 2016 [Romanenko, Lisyutkin 2017].

Firstly, it was specified that most of the mergers are organized in a "top-down" approach, i. e., they were initiated not by the universities themselves after long-term cooperation, but by external stakeholders—federal and regional management and included in major state processes of higher education system reorganization. In some cases these processes even occurred involuntarily.

Secondly, in international experience, an amalgamation is not the one and only option, but rather an extreme form of cooperation between universities. There are also such interaction options as alliances and consortia [Harman, Harman 2003], where universities implement joint educational and scientific programs, purchase expensive equipment for common use, but do not become a united organization. In Russia, such cooperation between universities is rare. More often than in most cases universities move from being independent organizations towards the formation of a single university.

Thirdly, the process of merging, from the initial decision on reorganization to the launch of the first joint training programs, is usually designed for an extremely short period and is not always accompanied by comprehensive studies on the need for reform and discussions on the matter.

Finally, students in Russian universities, both individually and within the student councils and parliaments, rarely take part in conversations about the current merger of universities or the selection of a new name and mission, and also seldom get to know their future colleagues and fellow students from a partner institution. As a rule, students are informed about the reorganization only after the decision is made, while the researchers of the mergers note that "Wherever possible, appropriate guarantees should be given to both staff and students. Of utmost importance is the need to generate staff, student and community support for proposed mergers. This will involve sharing merger plans widely, articulating goals and rationales, and promptly addressing rumours and errors of fact" [Harman, Harman 2003. P. 41].

2. University mergers: What changes

In the research and analytical literature devoted to amalgamations and takeovers of universities, the main changes occurring in educational organizations in connection with university mergers have been revealed.

1. Level/specialty: due to the unification, the level or sector of the educational system may change for educational organizations. This can be seen in the transformation of specialty colleges and insti-

tutes into universities by merging several educational organizations or joining them to major higher education institutions [Harman 1991; Kyvik, Stensaker 2013; Zhao, Guo 2002].

2. Mission, status, title: when reorganization is an instrument for creating a unified super—university, the mission, status and, in some cases, the name of the university are changed. For instance, it gains the status of a "world-class university", a "flagship university", a "federal university", a "campus of excellence" and so on [Aula, Tienari 2011; Delgado, León 2015; Geschwind, Melin, Wedlin 2015; Romanenko, Lisyutkin 2017]. If the university is joined with another institution, its name and other identity elements change and it acquires the host university status.

3. Organizational structure: a new organizational structure is developed by university mergers and a federal or unitary form of a united university can be chosen here [Harman, Meek 2002]. In the first case, the joined higher educational institutions become structural elements (faculties, schools and departments) of the united university in their former structure and with their former administration office. In the second case a completely new structure is created, the duplicate departments merge and a consolidated management appears.

4. Educational programs: through the cooperation of united universities new higher-level educational programs are created [Harman, Harman 2003; Kyvik, Stensaker 2013] and/or there is a replacement of the curriculum of the attached university with the host institution's programs.

5. Communication and mobility: in the case of merging geographically separated campuses, a new system of communication and mobility is created [Norgerd, Skodvin 2002; Ursin et al. 2010].

6. Funding: funding and material resources are redistributed within the united university, and in some cases higher educational institutions receive additional government funding for reorganization [Andreescu et al. 2015].

7. Organizational culture: the task after reorganization is to create a new culture and a common history of the united university [Aula, Tienari 2011; Harman 2002], new traditions and symbols [Välimaa 1998]. At the same time, there is often a clash of organizational cultures of universities in the process of the merger. A clash might occur between universities associated with academic direction and universities focused on research activity or on professional environment [Mathisen, Pinheiro 2016].

3. Research design: Theoretical framework, data and methods

The students' perceptions of the changes during university mergers are the focus of this study. The universities mergers are considered in the framework of radical organizational change [Greenwood, Hinings 1996] according to which "Radical change creates uncertainty and

demand for understanding of social relations in the implicit or informal side of the organization" [Pavlyutkin 2014. P. 2]. In particular, this concept examines how the participants of reorganizations interpret the changes under external pressure and how this interpretation affects organizational behaviour.

There are different groups operating in the organization, they are not neutral in relationship to each other and have fundamentally different interests Moreover, some groups are more outspoken and enjoy more privilege than others. Each group can win or lose due to changes during and after the university merger. Our task is to find out what changes are critical for students. Students are not always taken into account as one of the typical groups whose interests affect the process of a university merger. Such a situation may occur due to the lack of consensus about the place of students in the university and in this regard there is a serious theoretical discussion: if they are the object or subject of university education and management [Klemenčič 2014; 2016], external customers—"clients" [Gumport, 2000] or internal stakeholders [Leišytė, Westerheijden 2015]. In the conclusions the most evident changes for the students are compared with the key changes in the higher educational institutions, which are the results of merging processes, as described by research and analytical literature. Thus, we show how major university reorganizations are interpreted in the perception of students who study in universities during a merger process.

A qualitative research strategy was chosen to assess the subjective significance and visibility of certain changes for students via individual semi-structured interviews and focus groups. In order to represent the potential diversity of students' reactions in universities during the merger process, the four actual cases of university mergers that differ in the type of association (merging with the establishment of a new unified university with a new name and a new mission or joining of one university as a structural unit with another), geographical location and academic profile are displayed. Table 1 depicts a brief description of those cases. For ethical reasons, the real names of the universities—participants in the merger process, are not disclosed. Characteristics of mergers are introduced based on the classification of typical mergers and alliances, developed by D. Andréescu et al. [Andreescu et al. 2015] and complemented by information on the status of higher educational institutions relative to each other, taken from the Monitoring of the Quality of Enrollment to Universities in 2014–2016.[1]

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[1] The Monitoring of the Quality of Enrollment to Universities was held by a working group of the National Research University Higher School of Economics in cooperation with the "Social Navigator" project conducted by International News Agency "Rossiya Segodnya" supported by Ministry of Education and Science of Russia and the Public Chamber of Russia. https://ege.hse.ru.

Table 1. **The main cases of university mergers**

Case	Code number	Specification
1	C1	The merger of a mid-ranking humanitarian university with a wide network of affiliates into a large and well-known mid-ranking pedagogical university
2	C2	The merger of several small mid-ranking universities majoring in economics and management into a large and well-known high-ranking university, also focused on education in the field of economics and management
3	C3	The merger of several mid-ranking and low-ranking engineering universities (including universities with the network of affiliates) and the establishment of a large united engineering university with a new name and a new mission
4	C4	The merger of two mid-ranking universities, classical and engineering, and the establishment of a new united university within the framework of the "Flagship Universities" program

The strategy of "convenience sampling" was used to select respondents for cases 1 and 4. The "snowball" strategy was used for cases 2 and 3. As a result, about 80 students aged 19 to 25 took part in interviews and focus groups. There were men and women, enrolled in different levels of study (undergraduate and graduate) and in different programs: linguistics, sociology, history, psychology, pedagogy, biology, mathematics, natural sciences, economics, civil law, engineering, design, etc. Among the respondents there also were students from different universities in each of the cases who were participants of the merger process as all of them were already studying at the university by the time of the launch of the merger process, i. e., they experienced the organizational changes first hand. Students who entered the united university were excluded from the study. The experience of those graduates who finished university before the reorganization process was launched deserves a specific study. Several interviews with teachers and the administrative staff of the universities participating in the merger process were arranged in order to characterize the context of each of the cases. The analysis of official documents regulating the reorganization was also conducted.

The questions for the interviews and focus groups were formed into three thematic clusters: a) the merger process and opinions about it; b) the attitude towards your university and partner university (universities); c) individual and group advantages and disadvantages of the union, as seen by students. The interview guides deliberately did not specify any direct questions about important changes for students in order to avoid expected and rehearsed answers. Subjectively important changes were identified during the analysis of transcribed

Table 2. **Changes during merger, subjectively visible and subjectively important for students**

"Formal" changes	Organizational characteristics: scholarships, dormitories, internships and practical training periods, formal communications within the university
	Characteristics of the educational process: requirements for examinations, term papers and thesis; teachers; educational track, curricula and official qualification specified in the diploma
"Informal" changes	University culture: traditions, "atmosphere", informal communications within the university
	Brand, status and reputation of the university and its diploma

interviews. The main groups of the most visible and significant changes for students, which were the result of university mergers, were identified during the coding process [Cohen, Manion, Morrison 2013].

4. Results: What changes for students during the merger

The Table 2 depicts the two most significant and sensitive changes for students, which are grouped according to thematic blocks. "Formal" and "informal" changes were determined based on the answers of informants. The changes, which exist and are noticeable to everyone according to students, were considered as formal. The changes, which are "subjective", immeasurable, and related to the emotional sphere of change, were considered as informal ones.

4.1. Key changes: Organizational characteristics

Financial means, university infrastructure, organization of living arrangements and time spent in relation to this issue are some of the main and often the first topics mentioned by students.

> "We have already changed the building for the third time. Now we are studying in the building *of another university* (the names of the universities have been italicized.— *K.R.*). And it wasn't only our program that it happened to. <…> To tell the truth, I am already tired: it is not clear where the apartment should be rented" (a girl, 21 y. o., C1).

> "There are advantages and disadvantages. Our fee based program students continued to pay the same amount under the contract, but the housing contracts were modified, and some students have lost their student housing guaranteed until graduation" (a boy, 23 y. o., C2).

> "Infrastructure suffered: almost all food stalls were closed, and the classes in *another university* equipped with the supplies we need are scarce" (a boy, 20 y. o., C2).

The issue of study conditions—remoteness of the university, living expenses, etc.—becomes the key topic when the reorganization of universities in addition to the merger also provides for the liquidation of a network of affiliates. In such cases, the university undergoing the change seriously alters not only the educational process, but also the entire way of life for students.

> "When I was in my second year, there were rumors that the university will be closed. In the third year we became *another university*. It turns out I will actually graduate from the third university. We were upset, because there was no enrollment after us, so they could have taught us in the city, and then do what they want. <…> Now we have to be travelling to and from Moscow every day, we spend five hours a day commuting. Rooms in the dormitory are not being assigned to those living in our city" (a girl, 23 y. o., C3).

> "I did not want to study anywhere else except for my city so I applied to the affiliate. Whereas previously I left the house and there was the university just around the corner, and the family was here. Now I have to move to Moscow to graduate" (a girl, 19 y. o., C1).

The organizational structure of higher education institutions changes during mergers and organizational processes are changed. Radical changes cause a sense of uncertainty among the participants of university mergers. If they do not receive complete information on the process of the reorganization, any changes in the educational process and related problems are perceived in an acute way and given further connotations. For example, notions of discrimination of certain members of the merger arise and, as a result, rumours of conflict between the merging universities appear.

> "I started my school year in yet *another university*, but they told me: you did not fulfill your program requirements, and they threatened to expel me. Then it turned out that documents about the makeup exams were lost during relocation in summer. <…> Well, they were found later. But everything was done so reluctantly and these employees from *another university* talked to me in that way! If I'm not from their university initially, it means I'm a second-class citizen, whatever" (a boy, 21y. o., C1).

In terms of the advantages provided by university mergers, the development of educational opportunities for students and even the reduction in competition for university resources in a given region are often considered [Kyvik, Stensaker 2013. P. 327]. However, for students, the merger may have the effect of an increase in perceived competition for material opportunities and career prospects.

"Next year I should have an internship in Spain from the faculty. But the amount of students has increased. So what? Does it mean I have to go through the selection process again because of more competitors?" (a girl, 22 y. o., C4).

4.2. Key changes: The characteristics of the educational process

Students mentioned first of all the replacement of the teaching staff and the increase in the number of fellow students among the changes occurred in connection with the reorganization of educational process. Both issues can be perceived as a positive as well as a negative outcome.

"At my faculty there was not a single previous teacher. I think it's good that the teaching staff has changed. It is believed that in *another university* they are more qualified" (a boy, 23 y. o., C3).

"The only group of marketers I studied in became a part of a large marketing department where it is the 8th. <...> All educational processes have changed up to the curriculum, which suffered the most" (a boy, 20 y. o., C2).

"Changing the rules of the game" regarding the examination process, the content of course projects and the process of thesis presentation is another fundamental change for students. Moreover, these changes can be interpreted both as a fair strengthening of the requirements for students because of their incorporation in a stronger or more prestigious university and as discrimination of students from one university by teachers from another.

"Most of the concerns were caused by the commission on the State examinations and the thesis presentations. Guys who are used to preferential treatment <...> well, even if you do not answer anything, you get three (troika), really stepped up" (a girl, 24 y. o., C3).

"Our girl, who was supposed to get honors degree, was simply made to fail her exam. In my opinion, it was completely undeserved. When she went to talk to the dean of the faculty, his reaction was, you know, to scratch his stomach, sympathetically tap on her shoulder and wish her good luck in the future" (a girl, 23 y. o., C2).

The modifications in official educational track and field of study indicated in the diploma were significant as "formal" ones for students. Almost all mergers are accompanied by such transformations, since the task is to eliminate duplicate departments in two or more organizations, which is common in such situations. In some cases departments that are similar in function or academic focus preserve the autonomy and even compete with each other at united universities [Osipov, Ivanov 2004, p. 167; Finance, Coilland, Mutzenhardt 2015]. In other cas-

es they are merged into one department. Some of the amalgamations seriously affect the interests from the students' point of view.

> "Our program—tourism—has shifted to the geographical faculty. <...> Well, probably, because it is about travel... <...> I am personally insulted. It will not be properly specified in the diploma that I am a tourism analyst because I will be someone like a geography teacher" (a girl, 20 y. o., C1).

So the reputation of teachers, the specificity of the curriculum, the number of fellow students, the strengthening of the requirements for students, the educational track and the field of study written in the diploma are significant for students as characteristics of the educational process, changing during a university reorganizational process. At the same time, participants did not mention any developments in the content of the educational process or the knowledge and skills obtained during the study as being critically important for them.

4.3. Key changes: University culture

The need for the creation of a unified university culture after a merger or takeover is regularly specified in the analysis of mergers as a key task. A clash of representatives from different university cultures in the united university is one of the most frequent problems. In our study, students also consider incorporation into a new university culture as a negative experience and share difficulties in communication with students and employees from a partner university who are from a different culture and "atmosphere". Participants experience the consequences of university culture collisions in following situations:

a) the shift from a small university where personal contacts matter to a large university where interactions are caused by bureaucratic procedures;
b) the shift from universities with a focus on vocational education to a university where research is a priority;
c) the forced interaction between students from universities with a different academic orientation ("technicians" and "humanitarians", "normal historians / linguists" and "educators"—in terms of informants).
d) the forced change in customs, holidays, and ways to actualize the shared history and identity of the university.

> "I definitely like it that I can see far more people in the university than before. I take part in events more. But due to the size there is lots of bureaucracy and a huge distance between students and teachers. What did our university boast about? Its internal atmosphere. There is no such a thing here. <...> There is also a very arrogant attitude from the dean's office; a very high degree of formalization. If you forget your pass, you should go to the checkpoint, where, of

course, there is a queue. So you have to call your chair, let you write out a temporary pass and go down to the checkpoint, and only after this you can go through. <...> I cannot say that such a culture has a positive impact on study, not really" (a boy, 21 y. o., C2).

"Of course, there is a difference between us. Our teachers are still scientists and researchers <...> Well, we have prominent psychologists, for example. This gives some kind of breadth of mind, some completely different communication culture in the university" (a girl, 20 y. o., C1).

"We have strong artistic traditions. We constantly make holidays, performances, and concerts. For example we have the "Theater Spring", everyone participates in it, and our teachers encourage it. They have nothing like this, they just study. <...> It's scary when our reliance on creativity will be shortened because of the merger" (a girl, 18 y. o., C4).

4.4. Key changes: Status/reputation of the university

The issue of the brand, status and reputation of the university and its diploma, as well as the changes in connection with the reorganization, was at the top of the priority list for students, regardless of their positive or negative opinion towards events taking place at the university. At the same time, respondents did not mention official international and Russian university rankings. The status of the university and possibility to belong to its potential graduate were determined based on the opinions of relatives, acquaintances, the media and abstract "public opinion".

"After the merger, our university simply turned into nothing—without its normal name, without its history. <...> Previously everyone in the region knew what I talked about: it was my faculty, it was my university. And now it is unclear where I studied and what I graduated with" (a boy, 20 y. o., C4).

The reactions to organizational changes among students from different universities—members of the merger process—are asymmetric. In the case of the subjective and objective inequality of partner universities, students of weaker universities describe themselves as winners: they have the opportunity to become graduates of a higher status and more famous university. They quickly begin to identify themselves with the united university.

"I see more advantages than disadvantages of the merger, but my opinion is biased, because I dreamt to enroll at *another university*. At the time I did not enroll in it, but it turned out to be here now. <...> So I'm glad that I will have a diploma of university I wanted to enroll at" (a girl, 21 y. o., C3).

On the contrary, the students of the university considered to have more status and popularity before the merger, describe the situation regarding organizational changes as unfair and depreciating their diploma and their status as future graduates of their university.

> "Really it is disappointing that it turns out our diploma does not mean anything. We made efforts to do something while others were just transferred to us. <...> How will employers find out whether I'm a normal graduate or from this merged university?" (a girl, 23 y. o., C1).

5. Conclusions

Data on key changes during university mergers and takeovers described in the research and analytical literature together with the results of this survey allow for identifying the students' perception of these events (Table 3). For example, only local revisions in terms of organizational structure and funding system affect the daily study routine, while such transformations are usually the main focus of attention of those who enforce and analyze university mergers. On the contrary, a new organizational culture, i. e. interaction of staff, teachers and students from different universities and the task of creation a common organizational culture of a unified university, is visible and important at each level and for all university groups.

Students do not mention the content of education by itself as a characteristic of the learning process, but it becomes significant for them after its modifications during the reorganizational process. It occurs despite the widespread rhetoric about university mergers as a way to provide students with access to strengthened and diverse curriculum and generally to expand their educational opportunities. Students associate research activities at the university with teachers, but not with their own curriculum. Research is mentioned as one of the elements of the common university culture, but not as an opportunity for study or internship.

The issues of prestige, status and level of the educational institution, its teachers and its diplomas, are the most significant ones for students. Students as stakeholders within the university evaluate the most important organizational changes for them and strive to take maximum advantages for themselves "... to seek to translate their interests into favorable allocations of scarce and valued organizational resources" [Greenwood, Hinings, 1996. P. 1033]. The most valuable assets for them are not knowledge obtained during the study within educational programs, but the material conditions and the status of the diploma described, incidentally, not through official ratings, but through public opinion and the opinion of potential employers.

Thus the results of the study complement the available data on the transformation of higher education institutions during their mergers and make it possible to take into account students' opinions when de-

Table 3. **Key changes during university mergers**

University mergers: what changes	University mergers: what is significant for students
Level/specialty of education system	Brand, status and reputation of the university and its diploma University culture: traditions, "atmosphere", informal communications within the university Characteristics of the educational process: requirements for examinations, term papers and thesis; teachers; educational track, curricula and official qualifications specified in the diplomas
Mission, status, title	Brand, status and reputation of the university and its diplomas
Organizational structure	Organizational characteristics: scholarships, dormitories, internships and practical training periods, formal communications within the university
Educational programs	Characteristics of the educational process: requirements for examinations, term papers and thesis; teachers; educational track, curricula and official qualifications specified in the diplomas
Communication and mobility	Organizational characteristics: scholarships, dormitories, internships and practical training periods, formal communications within the university
Funding	Organizational characteristics: scholarships, dormitories, internships and practical training periods, formal communications within the university
Organizational culture	University culture: traditions, "atmosphere", informal communications within the university

signing such mergers. These results can be interpreted more broadly: analysis of students' reactions during the period of critical changes contributes to the tradition of research and discussion concerning the place of students in the modern local university.

Based on the results of the study the following issues seem to be forward-looking: the elaboration of ways to inform students about the university reorganization and their involvement in the management process, for example, during the development of a new strategy for a unified university; the analysis of university culture as an index of quality of life in university, which experiences challenges during organizational changes; and the research of student identity as a characteristic more or less associated with features of a particular university.

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