



University mergers in Russia from the students' perspective: uncertainty and loss of identity

Ksenia Romanenko¹ · Isak Froumin¹

Published online: 15 May 2019
© The European Higher Education Society 2019

Abstract

University mergers are a common practice in higher education systems around the world. Merger-related aspects such as the transformation of organizational and administrative structures, the impact on the internal funding allocation mechanisms, or changes in academic strategies and profiles, are well researched. However, the role of students in university mergers and their understanding of these processes are hardly investigated. The aim of this study was to identify how students are affected by merger processes. Through the conceptual framework, integrating university organizational identity theory and studies of the human side of mergers and acquisitions, this article encompasses six institutional cases in Russian higher education. These cases were selected to illustrate different scenarios of university mergers and accordingly to analyze the variety of student experience in changing universities. The project's data included the results of document analysis, analysis of the merged universities' representation in the public space, interviews and focus-groups with university administrators and with students who studied during the process of university merger. It highlights such perceived effects of mergers as anxiety and perceived unfairness due to post-merger changes, activation of we-they opposition between the students of merged universities, loss or transformation of organizational identity, and clash of university cultures.

Keywords University mergers · Organizational change · Organizational identity · Higher education policy · Student experience · Student feedback

Introduction

University mergers are a fruitful research topic to understand the landscape of higher education systems, because they are often used as a tool of large-scale governmental programs with different goals: from reducing costs to establishing super-universities. In addition to studying university mergers as an educational policy, they are analyzed to highlight managerial practices

✉ Ksenia Romanenko
kromanenko@hse.ru

¹ National Research University – Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russian Federation

of university administration in the transitional moments (Ursin et al. 2010). University mergers can represent a chance to reduce competition for resources in a region (Kyvik and Stensaker 2013). They can also foster opportunities to create interdisciplinary educational programs (Harman and Harman 2003) and coherent educational communities with a new academic culture (Harman 2002; Norgerd and Skodvin 2002), or even reinvent the organizational identity of the united university, ‘a socially constructed concept of what the organisation is’ (Stensaker 2007, p.16).

Consolidation can become a big challenge for every university, so it requires serious analysis of all potential opportunities and pitfalls. The ‘human factor’ in mergers or ‘human side of mergers’ (Mirc 2007; Weber and Drori 2011; Seo and Hill 2005) is often mentioned as one of the most important problems in the process of reorganization. This human side of mergers - including clash of cultures, identity issues and accordingly resistance to reforms, protests before the mergers and conflicts after them from university staff and especially from students (Delgado and León 2015; Harman 2002) - can be so influential that ‘mergers may not always result in intended outcomes such as cost savings, revitalization, or cross-disciplinary collaborations given the cultural considerations that may impede the creation of cohesive institutional identity’ (Weerts et al. 2014, p. 256).

Nevertheless, the position of the students as one of the groups in university and their opinions on university mergers are still not fully described. Academic literature analysis has shown that students are described in three main types of situations (Romanenko 2018): in the role of ‘a source of problems’, as a quantitative indicator (e.g. potential increase in the number of students with a higher educational level after the establishing of a united university) (Aula and Tienari 2011), and as future beneficiaries (e.g. merging is described as a potential possibility of a greater choice of educational programs for students) (Harman and Harman 2003; Skodvin 2014; Ursin et al. 2010).

This lack of information about the role of students has provoked this study. The main aims were to identify perceived effects of university mergers for students and to describe the student perspective on university mergers. The specific research questions included: a) how do students in merging universities describe the process of reorganization and their position in changing universities?; b) how does the self-identification of students with a particular university change through organizational changes?; c) what organizational changes in mergers are subjectively important and noticeable for students?

From a theoretical point of view this research highlights student challenges in the transitional and crucial periods and can be a contribution to a wider understanding actual students’ interests in contemporary universities. From a practical point of view, this research can help to suggest better managerial decisions during organizational change. Reasonable doubts about the transitional position of students in merging universities in comparison with academics who are employees, and with future students who potentially can be beneficiaries of the united university creation, are explainable. But it is important to notice that problems from the student perspective on university mergers could be connected with issues of constructing of the community of students, graduates and academics, and their loyalty to one or other university, issues of university performance, and, finally, of university reputation.

Mergers are often analyzed as an extreme case of radical organizational changes (Clark et al. 2010; Greenwood and Hinings 1996; Pavlyutkin 2014). The topic of this research is a part of a greater issue of students being affected by organizational changes, which is becoming more and more relevant in the context of the competition of universities and the rapid organizational changes in universities all over the world.

Conceptual framework of the study

A conceptual framework was created to analyze in depth effects of university mergers perceived by students and to present a student perspective on university mergers. It includes a university organizational identity approach and studies of the human side of mergers and acquisitions.

In the mergers and acquisitions literature organizational identity is often researched in the context of mergers and other organizational change, because ‘identity issues become salient as the formal organizational entities cease to exist’ (Seo and Hill 2005, p. 435) and ‘the integration process implies a blurring of the boundaries between two organizations until the existing organizational identities change and a new identity emerges’ (Empson 2004, p. 760). Besides theoretical issues, transforming of organizational identity in mergers is studied for the better management of changes ‘to energize behaviour directed towards the goal of organizational change’ (Ullrich et al. 2005, p. 1552).

University organizational identity may be described both as ‘internal belief systems that inform sensemaking and subsequent action among members’ and as ‘institutional attempts to signal and project meaning – through logos, symbols, branding, and other marketing and communication strategies – to those outside the organization’ (Weerts et al. 2014, p. 230–231). So, student identity is a component of the university organizational identity, which means both how university as organization identifies itself and how its members, students in this case, identify themselves as members of the university.

The mergers and acquisitions literature suggests the explanation of typical difficulties with organizational identity before and after mergers, and sometimes ways for their resolution. Mergers could actualize organizational identification of the members in consolidating organizations and trigger resistance to changes, ‘we versus them’ dynamics (Hogg and Terry 2000, p. 133), and ‘antagonism and biases toward the other organizational members’ (Seo and Hill 2005, p. 435).

Summing up the main merger-related stressors for the members of the organization, Seo and Hill, in their integrative framework for the analysis of the human side of mergers, noted uncertainty, loss of identity, intergroup conflicts, perceived unfairness, acculturation stress, job environment changes, role conflict and ambiguity. Other researchers mentioned similar categories, for example, ‘organizational culture, culture clash, HR challenges, autonomy removal, organizational identification, integration, and organizational identity’ (Weber and Drori 2011, p.76) or managerial, psychological (stress and insecurity), and cultural factors of merger-related problems (Mirc 2007). Identification of these effects could be implemented to see the student perspective on university mergers as well.

Context of the study: university mergers in Russia

University mergers used to be a regular practice of educational policy in Russia and can be categorized into several main ‘waves’ or ‘eras’ (Romanenko and Lisytukin 2018; Zinkovsky and Derkachev 2018). The first one started in the early 1990s in the context of the Soviet higher education system restructuring. At that moment mergers were mainly voluntary, because their rationale was surviving in a new economic and political environment. Though it would be fruitful (Platonova and Semyonov 2018), it would be impractical to search mergers’ effects on students of this period.

The next wave of mergers was in 2006–2012 within the governmental program ‘Federal Universities’, which concerned the establishment of large united super-universities, competitive at the international level (Salmi and Froumin 2013). That program can be compared with the program International Campus of Excellence in Spain (Delgado and León 2015) and with creating of a World-Class University in Finland (Aula and Tienari 2011). Despite the active phase of university restructuring being finished, there are a lot of problems, provoked by human side of university mergers, which will be considered in this article.

The last two phases were related to the National Monitoring of Higher Education Institutions’ Performance and to a new governmental program of Regional Flagship Universities. According to the Monitoring, ‘underperforming’ universities were amalgamated by other higher education institutions since 2012. The program of Flagship Universities started in 2016 and included the series of mergers between regional universities with a goal to meet the challenges of the region. These two waves have been continued until the summer of 2017, when a new minister of education cancelled several starting mergers and changed the rules in the Flagship Universities program. Nevertheless, a large part of the reorganizational process has been launched and has affected students studying in the merging universities.

It is important to notice that university mergers in Russia like any other mergers caused a lot of painful questions and resistance. Four main features of university mergers in Russia (Romanenko 2018) could additionally increase common stressors (as predicted by the framework of problems in mergers and acquisitions integration by Seo and Hill) for university staff, academics and students. These features are the involuntary nature of educational policy and non-transparency of decision-making processes; the rather short periods set for reorganizations; the absence of such forms of cooperation as university alliances and consortia (only full mergers), and the lack of discussions and non-inclusion of students and student organizations in the decision-making processes in changing universities.

Design of the study

This study was conducted during the period 2016–2018. First of all, a pool of research cases was formed. Due to a strategy of maximum variation sampling they represent different waves of university reorganizations in Russia, mergers and amalgamations, current and finished by the moment of the research mergers, various educational directions and academic levels of merging universities. Short descriptions of cases, periods of data collection, and methods of data collection implemented are shown in Table 1.

For every case an analysis of university representation in the public space was done. We tried to find out how merging or united universities, their history, graduates, organizational symbols and merger processes are shown to their students and to a wider public outside the universities. A choice of data sources was determined by the moment of the merger. This stage was implemented through several types of data collection and analysis: analysis of official web-sites of universities (‘News’, “University History” and “University Structure”), participant observation in university museums, Open Days and other public events in universities. Here it was important to capture if the merger case was represented as a union of partners with an idea of a new united university or as a takeover by the biggest and most prestigious partner.

Official information about the rationales and challenges of mergers was obtained in structured interviews with university administration and academics. Among others there were questions about problems with students and about any activities with students devoted to

Table 1 Cases of university merges in Russia, chosen for the research

№	Short description	Methods of data collection	Period of data collection
Finished (by the moment of the research) university mergers			
1a	Merger of two high-ranking regional universities – classical and engineering with a big branch network – to establish a Federal University.	Interviews with graduates, university professors and administration. Analysis of universities' representation in public space.	Spring 2018
1b	Merger of several regional universities of various levels – classical and teacher training – to establish a Federal University (The consolidating university in this case is one of the first and most famous universities in Russia).	Interviews with graduates. Analysis of universities' representation in public space.	Spring 2016, Autumn 2018
1c	Amalgamation of several small, middle-ranking Moscow universities, specializing on economy and management, by a high-ranking big university of the same educational directions.	Online-petitions and social media analysis. Individual interviews with graduates. Analysis of universities' representation in public space.	Winter 2016
Current (by the moment of the research) mergers			
2a	Amalgamation of a middle-ranking Moscow teacher training university with a big branch network by a high-ranking and famous teacher training university.	Online-petitions and social media analysis. Individual interviews with students, university professors and administration. Focus-groups with students. Analysis of universities' representation in public space.	Autumn 2016
2b	Merger between several Moscow middle- and low-ranking engineering universities to establish a new polytechnic university.	Social media analysis. Individual interviews with students and university professors. Analysis of universities' representation in public space.	Winter 2016
2c	Merger between two middle-ranking regional universities – classical and engineering – to establish a regional flagship university.	Social media analysis. Individual interviews with students, university professors and administration. Focus-groups with students. Analysis of universities' representation in public space.	Spring 2016

reorganization, new structure and identity construction of the university, or lack of these activities.

Students' online-petitions, comments on them, and discussions in social media about actual mergers were analyzed to catch the most sensitive topics. Key arguments against university mergers were identified from online-petitions. Information about students' reactions to mergers was also found in open online-groups in 'Vkontakte', a popular Russian social network, oriented to secondary school and university students. These groups with common names 'Typical [name of the university or university department]' and 'Overheard/ *Podslushano* in [name of the university or university department]' are used for informal communication and disputes. It was very productive to find information on merger processes from the students' point of view and communication policy of university administration there.

Finally, the main part of the data set was formed through semi-structured individual interviews and focus groups with students who studied during university mergers. Students of Bachelor and Master programs, and to a lesser extent PhD-students, took part in this research to tell about their actual experience (cases 2a, 2b, 2c). Additionally, there was a series of individual interviews with graduates, who reconstructed their personal stories of education in merging universities (cases 1a, 1b, 1c).

Students were selected to represent different universities in every case of merger and different educational directions. More than 80 students took part in this research. Gender balance and age diversity (from 19 to 29) were also taken into account. Interviews were conducted on the terms of anonymity with permission to use information in the research.

Interviews were organized in universities and on neutral grounds. In exceptional cases video-calls were used. Focus-groups were organized in universities with the help of university administration for cases 2a and 2c (the probable influence of such a format on students' feedback was taken into consideration). Individual interviews lasted about 40 min, focus-groups about 1.5–2 h. Interviews were conducted in Russian. The quotes from interviews are translated into English for this article.

The interview guideline with open-ended questions consisted of three main sections:

1. *Transformation*: students and graduates were asked to tell about the process of merger they had experienced: changes they noticed; university environment at pre-merger, merger and post-merger stages; special events for students devoted to the reorganization (if they were any), and communication policy by university administration.
2. *Evaluation*: students and graduates were encouraged to express their subjective opinions about merger process and results, and to describe their personal gains and losses due to university reorganization.
3. *Identification*: students and graduates were invited to explain how they saw (even in terms of stereotypes) their original university, university-partner and united university. Finally, without asking direct questions students were asked to identify themselves with one or another university at different merger stages.

Records of interviews and focus-groups were transcribed verbatim with notes about affective reactions of students (laugh, sarcasm, etc). The data also included students' online-petitions and online-discussions in social media. The resulting corpus of texts was analyzed using analytical procedures developed in the grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1990), highly relevant in the research of subjective experience.

Using a stepwise process of open, axial and selective coding we identified the key categories and links between them. A line-by-line text analysis was carried at the open coding stage. Significant units were identified and then categorized into thematic codes. Examples of these thematic codes are 'Insults', 'Prestige', 'Atmosphere', 'Loss', 'Justice', 'Changes' and many others. At the stage of axial coding thematic links, indicating the properties, context, consequences, were built between the selected categories. Finally, at the stage of selective coding the grouping of categories was carried out and central patterns, describing student perspective on university mergers, were identified.

These three patterns answer three research questions about the student position in merging universities, student identification with one or another university in the context of university mergers, and organizational changes that were important and noticeable for students. They are: 1) uncertainty, anxiety and perceived unfairness, 2) transformation of identity: actualization of

‘we-they’ dichotomy and identities with pre-merger universities, identification with more prestigious university, loss of identity and a sense of devaluation of identification, 3) university environment change: acculturative stress and clash of cultures, changes in venues of campuses and dormitories, scholarships, opportunities.

Patterns detected during the analysis were compared with a list of typical sources of problems in the integrative framework of human side of mergers.

Findings: student perspective on university mergers

Table 2 shows what was important and troublesome for students in university mergers. The data about students was matched to the list of typical stressors for employees during and after mergers and grouped according to the respondents’ answers. One can see the patterns of the human side of mergers in the first column and corresponding patterns of the student perspective on university mergers in the second one.

‘Nobody could say what’s next’: anxiety and uncertainty

Summing information from petitions, social media, interviews and focus-groups it became possible to identify that students often feel anxiety even at the first stages of university mergers. This factor is a widespread reason that ‘can instantiate precisely the conditions that work against a successful merger’ (Hogg and Terry 2000, p. 134). Students describe the situation of organizational transformation as extremely uncertain and potentially unfair for them:

Nobody could say what’s next. What will be with our professors? What will be with our teaching groups? And places in a dormitory? And scholarships, first of all? We didn’t know anything. [from an interview with a student in the 1c case]

These results are supported in the mergers and acquisitions literature, explaining how employees of merging organizations ‘try to cope with uncertainty by predicting – often the worst

Table 2 Perceived effects of university mergers for students

Human side of mergers	Student perspective on university mergers
Uncertainty, insecurity, and anticipated negative impact on career and job. Perceived unfairness.	Uncertainty and anticipated negative (or unclear) impact on the educational process and future career, anxiety and perceived unfairness in the environment changes, communication with university administration, relations with new professors, and in the situation of the reorganization itself.
Loss of identity. Intergroup conflict and autonomy removal.	Transformation of identity: actualization of ‘we-they’ dichotomy and identities with pre-merger universities, identification with more prestigious university, loss of identity and a sense of devaluation of identification.
Acculturation stress and culture clash. Job environment changes. Role conflict and ambiguity.	University environment change: acculturative stress and clash of cultures, changes in venues of campuses and dormitories, scholarships, opportunities, new and unpredictable “rules of the game” in educational processes: strictness of exams and defenses, dealing with academic dishonesty, loyalty of professors.

case scenario' (Seo and Hill 2005, p. 424). In their evaluation of reorganization people used such metaphors as 'death' and 'loss' (Seo and Hill 2005, p. 427). In the Russian context one play on words, using the resemblance of a word 'to merge' in Russian and a slang version of 'to lose out', 'to fail', was often used in the speech of students and university staff, in online-petitions and discussions in social media.

A poor communication policy, when university administration does not share plans, goals and perspectives of reorganization, let anxiety and perceived unfairness subjectively – according to students' responses – grow. A way to reduce this anxiety, perceived unfairness, and resistance to mergers is through social support of students and active top-down communication. According to the data obtained in this research, students are usually not included in the strategic sessions or other events devoted to the reorganization. Typically, they are informed at the last moment (in some cases during summer vacations or during examinations) when rumors and predictions of the worst case scenarios have begun to circulate unofficially.

Both at the level of merger planning (theoretically) and after mergers (as a *fait accompli*) students often mentioned how they felt like reorganization was unfair. This unfairness could affect them individually, as students of one or another university department or educational direction, or as students of an entire merging university:

Our law department is specializing in the civil law, their law department is mostly about criminal law. It will be really unfair to lose our specialization and our teachers, who are respected specialists in civil law in our city. [from an interview with a student in the 2c case]

Besides the problem of students' exclusion from the process of decision-making, there are several anticipations and concerns that caused much anxiety and discontent. These are post-merger preservation of workplaces for university professors, distribution of benefits in university (opportunities for internships, places in dormitories), and blurring of identities with pre-merger universities during and after merger processes.

'We-they': loss of identity and intergroup conflict

Unintentionally university mergers make students see the Other – students of another university and the other university itself. It could help to identify who they are and who they are not. In practice, this is embodied in the activation of 'we versus them' views and conflicts – 'attacking the other side and defending their own' (Seo and Hill 2005, p. 429). Consequently, it works against the goal of consolidation of universities. Respondents often explain their emotional attention to mergers through their identifications with their pre-merger universities, and more specifically, with educational and academic directions in universities, with one or another university culture, and with university reputation:

We were against the merger, because our university was engineering, so we were engineers. It was so strange to begin to study with humanities students. [from an interview with a student in the 1a case]

In our merged department we unofficially divided territory at the campus and also joked a lot that we were 'normal historians' and future scholars, and they were just... history teachers. [from an interview with a graduate in the 1b case]

Post-merger splitting can transfer organizational identity issues into the field of personal judgements up to indignities. Escalating in-group favoritism is notable in respondents' statements about the more important history and mission of their pre-merger universities, better professors in their pre-merger universities, and them, students of pre-merger universities, as better persons.

We are creative and cheerful, and they are cold and boring. They only learn and then learn again. [from an interview with a graduate in the 2c case]

It was impossible to crossbreed 'a mongrel' and 'a purebred'. This is my opinion, sorry. [from a comment to an online-petition in the 1c case]

The crucial elements in the loss of identity processes are university status and reputation and their transformation after a merger. In cases where pre-merger universities had a marked difference in size, in their places at ratings and rankings, and in popularity, students' identifications changed asymmetrically. Students of the joined university often describe themselves as 'winners' due to an opportunity to get a degree and to graduate from a more prestigious university:

After a merger it will be impossible in our city to tease me because of my university. [from an interview with a student in the 2c case]

Such students also very quickly begin to identify themselves as the students of the other, more prestigious, university. This can be explained by overemphasis on credential and degrees (Collins 1979):

I do not tell at the internship where I have studied originally. Of course, I will not lie answering a direct question about my biography. But usually I mention my new university. This is more prestigious and better for a future job. [from an interview with a student in the 2a case]

The students of the consolidating university on the contrary describe the situation of the merger as 'unfair' to them, as devaluating their status and identity as future alumni of their university, and as devaluating their future credentials. It is typical for more successful groups to be 'less enthusiastic and displayed stronger biases' (Haunschild et al. 1994) in their resistance to mergers:

The name of our university has been famous since the Russian Empire times, I was proud to be a student. Of course, I was not satisfied to become an alumnus of unknown something. [from an interview with a graduate in the 1b case]

At the same time, some mergers (for example, cases 2b and 2c), establishing a new united university with a new mission have other specifics. These mergers and amalgamations have been positioned in media and at public events as alliances of equal partners. The united university has chosen a new name, articulated a new mission, and constructed the new organizational identity in general. There students from every university, involved in the merger, as usual qualify the reorganization as a beneficial for them. They begin to construct their student identity according to the organizational identity of the merged university (as

Empson described this process, ‘organizational members both shape and are shaped by their organizational membership through this dynamic dialectic process’ (2004, p. 760):

Maybe this is naive and a bit pretentious, but I am glad to be a part of something absolutely new, to become a student of the big new university. [from an interview with a student in the 2b case]

‘Where am I studying now?’: university environment change

University environment change could also be a significant perceived effect for students in the post-merger university. Situations that affect their everyday practices and make educational processes more complex are often mentioned by students as tangible consequences of university mergers. Venues of campuses and their infrastructure, places in student dormitories and fees for them became resources in merger-related contexts, which can be ‘unfair’ and unpredictably distributed between students, so university mergers become spaces of uncertainty and anxiety:

Where am I studying now? I am not sure in any answer [laughs]. Our department after a merger has changed a campus venue several times. So, it is rather difficult to feel university space as your own. And our documents are lost regularly. [from an interview with a student in the 2a case]

Students also mentioned university teaching teams as a value which they can lose in the process of university merger. This is fortified by the thesis on the student-professor relationship as one of the fundamental factors of student persistence and retention. Herein, arguments varied from unjust treatment of professors from their original university by the administration of the united university to perceived honor to be disciples of famous professors. In addition, level of formality in professor-student communication, level of tolerance of academic cheating, strictness of examinations and processes of defenses are factors in university environment which are changing due to university mergers. This change in the ‘rules of the game’ and the potential (or actual) risks of academic performance deterioration provoke role conflict and ambiguity in university, an important stressor for students:

I got used to simple, unofficial communication in my original university. It was possible to negotiate about deadlines or about documents you need without extra bureaucracy. But after a merger in this new big university I have become something impersonal, not a human being, just a set of regulations. [from an interview with a graduate in the 1c case]

Such processes can also be interpreted in terms of acculturative stress or cultural clashes. Culture clashes which ‘arise when people first notice the differences in ways of doing things (e.g., differences in communication style, planning, managerial authority, commitment, monitoring, and teamwork)’ (Seo and Hill 2005, p. 429) and problems of miscommunication they produce are well discussed topics in the context of mergers:

Yes, in the new university hard time came to me [laughs]. Another atmosphere. Another culture. Everybody is so active. They are so involved in all these projects, festivals,

concerts, etc. And I've expected just learning, normal learning. [from an interview with a student in the 2b case]

It is possible to identify elements of university culture, visible for and valued by students. These are communication styles, level of autonomy and self-governance of students, research or professional orientation, and the existing university traditions, holidays, symbols and common history.

Concluding discussion and implications

When universities are considered as organizations and university mergers are considered through the organizational theory frameworks, it is rather difficult to find a language for students because they are not employees and not typical clients. In this study we tried to describe them as a specific group of interest in university with some typical features and with goals, which can seriously differ from the goals of university administration and professors.

The aim of this research was to see the student perspective on university mergers and to detect how student experience is affected by merger-related changes. Mergers for students are a crucial moment and highlight the most important aspects of the university life, not so visible in stable periods. They include but are not limited to relationships with professors, university culture, identification with a particular university or with a future profession, and many other factors outlined in this article.

The impact of university mergers has been classified into three main clusters. Firstly, they deal with uncertainty, anxiety and perceived unfairness. Secondly, they focus on identity crisis in several versions: in-group favoritism, 'we-they' dichotomy, stronger identification with pre-merger universities, identification with the more prestigious university, or a sense of devaluation of identification. Thirdly, they spell out significant perceived changes in the university environment – culture, educational process, campuses and scholarships. These effects can result in different combinations, for example, students satisfied by their new identification with a bigger and more prestigious university at the same moment could feel changes in university culture and 'atmosphere' as a loss.

Student identity as a component of university organizational identity is 'associated with a deep approach to learning, which in turn is linked to higher academic performance' (Bluc et al. 2011, p. 417). Student identity is also 'an integral aspect of shaping their work-readiness as graduates' (Daniels and Brooker 2014, p. 65). These are additional arguments for the necessity to study students' reactions to organizational changes in university.

The communication policy of the university administration can contribute to the process of perception of university organizational changes. Special events to involve students in the process of decision-making (or their absence), notifications about changes (or their absence), and reinventing of organizational identity of the merged university could activate the perceived effects of university mergers for students.

The limitation for this study is its nation specificity, including mostly involuntary mergers in Russia, short periods for reorganizations, and closed nature of decision-making for students. Nevertheless, a deeper understanding of these processes, application of these results and the conceptual framework could be useful to predict overall challenges of university mergers and other radical organizational changes. There is a serious threat to the success of university mergers without consideration of the identified effects on students. Merger-related stressors may lead to resistance to change, turnover, absenteeism (Mirc 2007), lack of motivation, acts of noncompliance, interorganizational tension and conflict (Seo and Hill 2005).

Findings from the empirical cases, where students from different universities-partners evaluate mergers positively and begin to identify themselves with the united university, combined with recipes from the mergers and acquisitions literature, suggest several interventions to avoid potential resistance to change:

- (1) A better communication policy should be implemented to inform students about all the stages of forthcoming changes, merger-related benefits and opportunities. Ongoing communication, preventing gossip spreading, and social support may reduce anxiety, uncertainty and waiting for the worst-case scenarios.
- (2) Rationales to merge, the new mission of the united university, common goals, and new tasks that will become possible only due to the establishment of a new university should be articulated to encourage the construction of the new student identity, because it includes ‘construction of images of the Common Future’ (Vaara et al. 2003).
- (3) Students individually and as a part of student organizations should be involved in the discussion on this ‘common future’: to take part in conversations about the current merger of universities and about the strategy of the merged university, in the selection of a new name and other new organizational symbols.
- (4) Special events for getting to know future fellow students from a partner institution, fostering cross-organizational arrangements and activities (Seo and Hill 2005), should be planned to predict ‘we-they’ dichotomy and conflicts and to trigger building ‘a new sense of self within the new learning environment of the university’ (Scanlon et al. 2007, p. 238).

Overall, these strategies could reduce potential stressors and let individual students not ‘become an alumnus of unknown something’.

References

- Aula, H. M., & Tienari, J. (2011). Becoming ‘world-class’? Reputation-building in a university merger. *Critical Perspectives on International Business*, 7(1), 7–29.
- Bliuc, A. M., Ellis, R. A., Goodyear, P., & Hendres, D. M. (2011). Understanding student learning in context: relationships between university students’ social identity, approaches to learning, and academic performance. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 26(3), 417–433.
- Clark, S. M., Gioia, D. A., Ketchen, D. J., Jr., & Thomas, J. B. (2010). Transitional identity as a facilitator of organizational identity change during a merger. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 55(3), 397–438.
- Collins, R. (1979). *The credential society: An historical sociology of education and stratification*. New York: Academic Press.
- Daniels, J., & Brooker, J. (2014). Student identity development in higher education: implications for graduate attributes and work-readiness. *Educational Research*, 56(1), 65–76.
- Delgado, L., & León, G. (2015). Strategic aggregation of universities in Spain: The Spanish program international campus of excellence and the experience of the Technical University of Madrid. In A. Curaj, L. Georghiou, J. C. Harper, & E. Egron-Polak (Eds.), *Mergers and alliances in higher education* (pp. 243–272). Springer International Publishing.
- Empson, L. (2004). Organizational identity change: managerial regulation and member identification in an accounting firm acquisition. *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, 29(8), 759–781.
- Greenwood, R., & Hinings, C. R. (1996). Understanding radical organizational change: bringing together the old and the new institutionalism. *Academy of Management Review*, 21(4), 1022–1054.
- Harman, K. (2002). Merging divergent campus cultures into coherent educational communities: challenges for higher education leaders. *Higher Education*, 44(1), 91–114.
- Harman, G., & Harman, K. (2003). Institutional mergers in higher education: lessons from international experience. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 9(1), 29–44.

- Haunschild, P., Moreland, R., & Murrell, A. (1994). Sources of resistance to mergers between groups. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 24, 1150–1178.
- Hogg, M. A., & Terry, D. I. (2000). Social identity and self-categorization processes in organizational contexts. *Academy of Management Review*, 25(1), 121–140.
- Kyvik, S., & Stensaker, B. (2013). Factors affecting the decision to merge: the case of strategic mergers in Norwegian higher education. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 19(4), 323–337.
- Mirc, N. (2007). *Mergers and acquisitions: Revisiting the human factor in the light of a knowledge-based view of the firm and complexity theory*. Paper presented at the EIASM-22nd workshop on Strategic Human Resource Management, France.
- Norgerd, J. D., & Skodvin, O. (2002). The importance of geography and culture in mergers: a Norwegian institutional case study. *Higher Education*, 44(1), 73–90.
- Pavlyutkin, I. (2014) University merger and Sensemaking at the threshold: Understanding radical organizational change in higher education. *Basic Research Program. Working Papers Series: Education: WP BRP 16/EDU/2014*. <https://www.hse.ru/data/2014/10/15/1099305080/16EDU2014.pdf>. Accessed 03.09.2018.
- Platonova, D., & Semyonov, D. (2018). Russia: The institutional landscape of Russian higher education. In J. Huisman, A. Smolentseva, & I. Froumin (Eds.), *25 years of transformations of higher education systems in post-Soviet countries: Reform and continuity* (pp. 337–362). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Romanenko, K. (2018). University mergers: the implications for students. *Educational Studies Moscow*, 1, 154–173.
- Romanenko, K., & Lisytukin, M. (2018). University mergers in Russia: four waves of educational policy. *Russian Education and Society*, 60(1), 58–73.
- Salmi, J., & Froumin, I. (2013). Excellence initiatives to establish world-class universities: Evaluation of recent experiences [Kak gosudarstva dobivayutsya mezhdunarodnoy konkurentosposobnosti universitetov: Uroki dlya Rossii]. *Educational Studies Moscow*, 1, 25–68.
- Scanlon, L., Rowling, L., & Weber, Z. (2007). ‘You don’t have like an identity... you are just lost in a crowd’: forming a student identity in the first-year transition to university. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 10(2), 223–241.
- Seo, M. G., & Hill, N. S. (2005). Understanding the human side of merger and acquisition: an integrative framework. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 41(4), 422–443.
- Skodvin, O. J. (2014). *Merger as an instrument to achieve quality in higher education-rhetoric or reality?* Paper presented at the EAIR 36th Annual Forum in Essen, Germany.
- Stensaker, B. (2007). The relationship between branding and organisational change. *Higher Education Management and Policy*, 19(1), 1–17.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedure and techniques*. Newbury Park: Sage.
- Ullrich, J., Wieseke, J., & Dick, R. V. (2005). Continuity and change in mergers and acquisitions: a social identity case study of a German industrial merger. *Journal of Management Studies*, 42(8), 1549–1569.
- Ursin, J., Aittola, H., Henderson, C., & Välimaa, J. (2010). Is education getting lost in university mergers? *Tertiary Education and Management*, 16(4), 327–340.
- Vaara, E., Tienari, J., & Sääntti, R. (2003). The international match: metaphors as vehicles of social identity-building in cross-border mergers. *Human Relations*, 56(4), 419–451.
- Weber, Y., & Drori, I. (2011). Integrating organizational and human behavior perspectives on mergers and acquisitions: looking inside the black box. *International Studies of Management and Organization*, 41(3), 76–95.
- Weerts, D. J., Freed, G. H., & Morphew, C. C. (2014). Organizational identity in higher education: Conceptual and empirical perspectives in higher education. In M. B. Paulsen (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (pp. 229–278). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.
- Zinkovsky, K., & Derkachev, P. (2018). Restructuring the system of higher education: assessing the outcomes of university mergers. *Russian Education and Society*, 60(5), 402–421.