

Student Identity Transformation and University Mergers

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Policy Context: Russian «waves» of mergers

Mergers within the program “Federal Universities” in 2006-2012 [9]

Underperforming universities (according to the national Monitoring of Higher Education Institutions’ Performance) joining to other universities since 2012 [23 in Moscow and Saint-Petersburg]

Mergers within the program “Regional Flagship Universities” since 2016 [11]

Features of mergers and acquisitions in Russia

- 1) Top-Down Mergers
- 2) Full mergers
- 3) Quick mergers

**“Please, don’t listen to our students!
They are still young, and they don’t
understand what they are talking about”
(c)**

- Academic and analytical discussions on mergers are mostly about conflicts and issues related to university management (Ursin, Aittola, Henderson, Välimaa, 2010)
- Researchers look at future benefits or problems of university mergers for future students and the society as a whole (Delgado, León, 2015)
- Seldom current students and their experience are mentioned in analysis of the mergers (Skodvin, 1999)

In research papers students are usually described

- as objects of the reorganization of the universities (Melikyan, 2014)
- as quantitative resources (Finance, Coilland, Mutzenhardt, 2014)
- as an obstruction by their conflicts (Aula, Tienari, 2011)

How the students' identity is affected by organizational transformation:

- 1) How students judge the merge process of their universities and its effects for themselves
- 2) How students describe their identity with their former and their new – resulting – universities

Theoretical approach: cultural approach in higher education research by J. Välimaa (Välimaa, 1998) and the theory of social identity (Tajfel, 2010)

Research methodology: case-studies

Methods: observation, semi-structural interviews, document analysis; discourse-analysis of transcribed interviews

Main case:

Merger of two universities within the national program “Regional Flagship Universities”

Start of the program - February 2016. Final of the program – 2020.

Research - March 2016.

Additional cases:

Moscow universities (teacher training, engineering and classical universities) on the different stages of mergers

Main case:

a document-analysis, 16 individual and group interviews, 5 participant observation sessions

The total number of the respondents is 79 people, among them there are students of both merged universities, from departments of psychology and pedagogy, biology, math and science, economics, civil law, engineering, design.

Additional cases:

2 sessions of observations at Open days, individual interviews with students, analysis of social media sources, specifically students' petitions against mergers of their universities and discussion on mergers in students' social networks.

Patterns of students' reactions to university merger

Reactions	Examples
Pragmatic	“More places for internship, higher scholarship, so I’m glad to future merger” or “I’m worrying for my scholarship and free places in the university campus”
Neutral	“It’s all the same for me, just another title in the certificate”
Altruistic	“The university is dying without external support, so we need a merger and I’m personally ready to it”
Optimistic	“More people means more fun”, “I will gain a certificate of a higher level”
Negative	“I don’t want to be a part of new unknown university” or “It is impossible for me to study together with students from X university, because they are poor”

Patterns of students' reactions to university merger

Patterns of students' reactions and “strength” of manifestation of the identity transformation may depend on...

Type of merger

In the situation of acquisition, students of the “host” university may not see any problems in the merger and may not be interested in their partner university. But students from the other side can feel the lack of identity and cultural capital.

Examples:

“Everything is the same for me. University Z? I don't know who they are... Where they are... And I don't care about it”

or

“After the merger our university has disappeared, and we've transformed into... nothing. Without our name, without our history”

Significant changes in student experience during the university merger and identity

“Formal” changes	“Informal” changes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Educational track ○ Diploma/Official Qualification ○ Conditions (scholarship, accommodation, fees, formal communication systems) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ University culture (traditions, common history and myths, informal communication system) ○ Brand/status/reputation

University brand and students' identity

The situation of the merger actualizes the discussions about the university brand and status and their connection to student self-rating and identity.

- “A name of University X has been famous from Russian Empire times, I was proud to be a student. Of course, we all weren't satisfied to become alumni of the strange something”.
- “Honestly, I'm happy, because I will have a diploma of University X, and it's cooler”
- ! Stronger university brand “breaks” the identity!

If brands are “equal” => identity conflicts.

The main argument is the “special” university culture:

Students suppose that university merger would be unsuccessful due to differences in cultures of merged universities.

- “Our university is different from all others. We have traditions, for instance, a tradition of student theatres. There is also unique “home” atmosphere in our university, but another university hasn't it”.

Identity and Actualization of “We-They” dichotomy

Student identity to their former university and involvement can become stronger and new identity to the merged university cannot be formed.

These processes are seen:

1) In the conflicts and swearing:

An example: “It is impossible to breed a mongrel and a purebred”

Identity and Actualization of “We-They” dichotomy

2) In the updating of student and professional identity:

An example: “In the merged department we said that we were normal historians, and they were just... teachers”

3) In the addressing to the university culture specifics and their uniqueness as students:

An example: “We are creative and cheerful. We organize a lot of fests, concerts, performances. Our professors value it. But they [from the university-partner] are “cold” and boring. They only learn and then learn again”

Examples:

- “We were said: “A department of psychology was, is and will be in its campus, with its professors and with its educational tracks”. So we are not afraid of the merger”;
- “Our law department is specialized on the civil law, their law department is on criminal law. So what will be after the merger? I don’t know”;
- “We’re against the merger, because our university is polytechnic, and we are engineers. It is wrong to study with humanitarians”.

- Additional comparative studies are to be done to figure out which characteristics of merger affect students' experience
 - Study several ongoing merger processes to be able to explore the changes of the student attitudes and identities during this process
- ! The main research question of the next stage will be about how can merger process be less traumatic to current university students.

- The study emphasizes the need to consider students' experience in the period when a merger is being planned
- The social implication of this research is in informing public policy about importance of identity formation and university culture management in merging universities to reduce students' traumatic experience and to involve positively students to the processes of university change

Thank you for your attention!

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