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# Individual Experiences of a Merger: The REM-theory

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*The University of Johannesburg (UJ) merger is typical of transformation in South African Higher Education. This merger does not conform to the "norm"; as it is ideologically motivated and thus the ideal base to study individual experiences of large scale change. Following a qualitative, grounded theory approach, 40 academic employees from UJ were interviewed. Findings indicate that academic staff relay their experiences and perceptions of the merger in three discernable time-frames, each with its own dynamic. Collectively, these time-frames constitute the Reflective Experience of Mergers (REM) theory, which examines how merger experiences of academic staff shape their perceptions of and attitudes toward the merger over time. The REM- theory reiterates the temporal nature of change; its effect on the emotional and psychological well-being of individuals and the role of leadership during a merger.*

## Introduction

Over the past two decades or so mergers have become a common occurrence in the organisational landscape (Panchal & Cartwright, 2001; Papadakis, 2005) and now regularly feature on managerial agendas as a strategic option. Their popularity is grounded among others in their apparent effectiveness as an adaptive response to an operating environment that is becoming increasingly competitive, integrated (global) and fast paced (Miller, 2004; Schabracq & Cooper, 2000). Mergers are considered a quick and efficient means of enhancing growth (non-organic), improving synergy and economies of scale, diversifying and expanding into new markets, diluting and spreading risk (Papadakis, 2005); making them a means of considering sustainability in otherwise challenging operating circumstances.

Despite this generally optimistic view of mergers, there is substantial evidence to suggest that mergers and merger-related activities are not as successful as they were intended to be (Eriksson, 2004; Fulop, Protopsaltis, King, Allen, Hutchings & Normand, 2005; Lundback & Horte, 2005). Reported success rates for mergers are surprisingly low and the incidence of failure reportedly varies between 40% and 80% (Panchal & Cartwright, 2001; Papadakis, 2005). The majority of mergers essentially fail to satisfy the original intention behind their initiation.

Mergers inevitably lead to a reassessment of merged operations and activities and often result in re-organisation, rationalisation and redundancies (CIPD, 2000:2) which, in turn, prompts a reconfiguration of functional teams that contribute to confusion around reporting lines – to the extent that people often lose their 'mental maps' of how the workplace functions (Fulop, et al., 2005:127; Lundback & Horte, 2005:232). Any attempt at integrating corporate entities has very real Human Resources (HR) implications (CIPD, 2000:3; Papadakis, 2005:239). Failing to address these HR issues typically evokes a range of symptomatic responses that are commonly observed in mergers, such as stress, anxiety, depleted productivity levels, increased absenteeism, declining job satisfaction and resistance to change (Fulop, et al., 2005:128; Papadakis, 2005:241). Collectively referred to as "merger syndrome", these symptoms are a logical consequence of what is generally conceptualised as a very stressful life event (Panchal & Cartwright, 2001) and indicative of the less than adequate attention that HR issues receive during the merger.

The preceding context highlights the pivotal role of the 'human factor' and the substantial consequences of mergers. The ensuing discussion briefly contextualises the research setting, outlines the methodology that was employed, presents the more salient findings and presents the REM-theory resultant from these findings. The paper concludes with a consideration of the main implications for managerial practice.

## The Research Setting

During the past three years some eight mergers of universities and technikons took place in the South African higher education sector. This paper is concerned with a particular merger that was announced on 31 May 2002 and forms part of this restructuring of the higher education landscape (TWR, 2002a; TWR, 2002b). It entailed the merging of the Rand Afrikaans University (RAU), the Technikon Witwatersrand (TWR) and two campuses of Vista University (the East Rand and Soweto campuses). In the interest of clarity and brevity this comprehensive merger process is simply referred to as the 'UJ merger' in the remainder of this paper. The UJ merger would unfold in two discernable stages (TWR, 2003a) i.e. the incorporation of the two Vista campuses into RAU by 1 January 2004 and the merging of RAU and TWR - effective 1 January 2005.

The reasons advanced by the South African government for the mergers in higher education, and therefore the merger of RAU and TWR into the UJ, suggest that these mergers were politically and ideologically motivated (cf. Mokadi, 2002). The UJ merger marked the establishment of the largest residential university in South Africa, and moved from planning to implementation on 1 January 2005. Large scale, multidimensional and multi-faceted change followed, which resulted in the formulation of a new strategic plan (UJ, 2005a), which, in turn, formed part of a larger institutional change initiative (UJ, 2005b). A change governance structure was established (UJ, 2005b) to ensure that change efforts were not dealt with in isolation but were directed at strategic level yet implemented and coordinated at functional level (UJ, 2005b).

The central research question that consequently informed this study and directed its focus, design and execution, addressed the issue of *how individuals – and in particular academic staff – experienced the UJ merger?* By focusing on academics experience the study aimed *to gain a deeper and enriched understanding of academics' (as individual employees) experience of the UJ merger and their subsequent commitment to this merger* following the large scale change to which they were exposed.

The paucity of literature on the individual experience of large scale change in general and mergers in particular further accentuates the need for research that seeks to fathom individual dynamics during such events. The value of the study, however, is further indicated by the unique features of the UJ merger, which include the non-commercial origins of the merger.

## Research Method

The nature of the research question suggests a qualitative, exploratory study, which, as Mouton (1996:103) argues, attempts to gather new data and 'facts' and to establish whether there are interesting or novel patterns in the data. The choice of a qualitative design is generally considered appropriate when little previous research has been conducted in the subject domain (cf. Mouton, 1996:102-103). The qualitative design was effected through a *case study* approach, which allows investigation of phenomena as 'bounded systems' (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004); which are social entities demarcated (thus bounded) by parameters that enable exposure of their distinctive dynamics and from which data can be solicited. In this study the focus is on change in the UJ, which can be viewed as a bounded system with clear parameters and a specific and unique dynamic.

The ontological platform for the study is indicated by the study's point of departure namely the impact of a merger on people. The study will focus on the experience of individual academics and works at the level of individual feelings, attitudes, beliefs, views, and understandings of the merger; the latter being personally and socially constructed and fits an *interpretive* research paradigm. In this regard Neuman (2003) argues that researchers operating from within an interpretative paradigm strive to systematically analyse socially meaningful actions through direct observation, in order to understand how people create and maintain their social worlds. From an epistemological perspective it follows that first hand accounts (e.g. verbatim narratives) of how the merger was experienced, and obtained directly from those who experienced it, will be most suited as a vehicle of knowledge.

The *research population* comprised all full time academic personnel in the employ of the UJ. As with most qualitative studies, non-probability sampling was employed in this study – in particular as representativity in terms of the population, is not a consideration. However, for reasons such as the distinctly different nature and cultures of the merging institutions, variation in campus locations, differences faculties, hierarchical levels and management philosophies, it was felt that the traditional approaches to sampling in qualitative studies be elaborated to allow for greater diversity in perceptions

and experiences related to the merger. As a result the sample size was structured on a purposive basis which would ensure participants from all faculties, across all campuses. This resulted in the selection of two research subjects per faculty per campus, except in those instances where the faculty has a presence of less than 10 full time academic employees on any particular campus. In these instances sampling numbers were reduced to one research subject per faculty per campus. In this manner a sample of 40 research subjects was arrived at.

Open-ended, semi-structured interview techniques were used for *data gathering* (cf. Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), which translated into an interview schedule consisting of three open-ended questions which prompted respondents to share their experiences, feelings, perceptions and expectations of the merger. Grounded theory was employed method of analysis; to derive meaning from the gathered data. As all interviews were digitally recorded, they had to be transcribed where after the data was coded to facilitate categorisation and extraction of prominent themes, and ultimately theory building. Consistent with Corbin and Strauss' (1990) grounded theory approach, open, axial and selective coding was applied to surface themes from the data. During *open coding*, all sentences (the designated unit of analysis) were allocated labels. As a consequence every similar meaning phrase (sentence) received the same label while every 'new' meaning phrase was allocated a new label, and ultimately a series of themes emerged (cf. Babbie & Mouton, 2004; Henning, et al, 2004). During *axial coding*, relations and linkages among these themes were revealed, while *selective coding* enabled the construction of an essential 'narrative' (and 'theory') of the entire dataset as it pertained to the experience of the merger.

## Findings

Resultant from the analytical process, emergent themes were identified which afforded insights into academic's experiences of the merger and of the pre-merger phase. Through open and axial coding, data was reduced to 17 themes; with the first four being indicative of pre-merger experiences; the following nine providing insights into experiences of the implementation of the merger and the latter four providing insights as to the predicted future of the merger.

### ***Theme 1: Institutional predisposition***

Interview subjects tended to reflect on the dynamic of the institutions they hailed from prior to the merger. This afforded the opportunity of understanding how subjects viewed the institutions they hailed from, which in turn, affected the way in which individuals reacted to the merger.

***Views expressed toward RAU:*** It is evident that ex-RAU staff harboured generally very positive sentiment toward this institution. Evidence suggests that levels of job satisfaction were generally quite high amongst academics at this institution.

***Views expressed toward TWR:*** Although perceived as an institution with a good reputation amongst technicians, ex-TWR staff harboured generally negative, and at times scathing, sentiment toward the TWR, leading one to believe that levels of job satisfaction generally tended to be low at this institution.

***Views expressed toward Vista:*** Vista seemed to be a university typified by autonomy and motivated staff. Unfortunately mismanagement led to the eventual dissolution of Vista at the end of 2003. Although uncertainty typified Vista, morale seems to be generally high, indicating that the factors that lead to the dissolution of the university had no effect on the prevalent ethos and operational dynamic of the institution.

### ***Theme 2: Individuals' reaction to the merger.***

People will be more amenable to embracing the change if they agree to the principle of the merger. It was evident that the announcement to merge was met with varied reactions from staff, ranging from extreme negativity, through indifference, to extreme optimism. Reactions emanating from the merging institutions tended to be polarised. Reactions from the ex-RAU fringed on indifference but exhibited a large amount of negative reaction. Reactions from the ex-TWR tended to be largely positive. Ex-Vista staff, although eventually incorporated into RAU, tended to air negative opinions, but cited different reasons for this negativity from the ex-RAU staff. When looking at negative reactions expressed, these seemed to be rooted in:

***Disagreement with the reasons to merge:*** Interview subjects were at odds with the reasons for the merger as provided by the government, although some of the reasons provided, such as better access to HEI's and rationalisation and consolidation of the higher education landscape found favour with

a number of interview subjects. The overwhelming sentiment was that the merger was politically motivated and that the merit of the merging institutions played no role.

**Merging a university and a technikon:** A number of subjects interviewed failed to comprehend how a merger between a technikon and a university can be successful, given the differences in terms of nature, culture, ethos and operations between a traditional university and a technikon.

**Positive institutional predisposition:** Positive institutional predisposition is indicative of high levels of job satisfaction, culminating in deeply entrenched comfort zones evoking highly emotive responses when confronted with large scale change. This factor was a large contributing factor toward negative sentiment to the merger

Positive reactions expressed toward the merger have their origins in:

**Negative institutional predisposition:** Dissatisfaction with the merging institution is generally indicative of low levels of job satisfaction, thus evoking feelings of change being necessary. This factor was especially prevalent amongst ex-TWR subjects and tended to override non agreement with the reasons cited for merger by government.

**Individual preference of change:** Some individuals interviewed simply ascribed their optimism toward the merger to their personalities, stating they prefer change and feel uncomfortable with a protracted status quo.

**Opportunities presented by the merger:** Interview subjects also tended to focus on the potential advantages and opportunities that the merger held as beneficial to the greater institution. Factors such as access to a larger resource base, a larger variety of programs for students, articulation possibilities to facilitate movement between academic and vocational streams, an expansion of research opportunities and increased organisational effectiveness through rationalisation were cited.

**The need to further national agendas:** A number of individuals felt that the merger possessed merit from a transformational point of view.

### **Theme 3: Fears and concerns pertaining to the merger**

Reactions to the merger were accompanied by certain concerns and fears of what the merger would imply. Many of these fears and concerns can be viewed as direct, emotionally driven responses to a change event that staff had no knowledge of.

**The uncertainty associated with change:** The very real threat of losing one's job was voiced by some. Other concerns associated with uncertainty revolved around redeployment to other campuses, physical relocation of facilities to other campuses and general disruption of individual comfort zones

**Loss of status:** Prevalent particularly from ex-RAU interview subjects was the concern that UJ would be a university of lesser standing. The concern was expressed that UJ would not be a researched focussed university, but one where research activities were of secondary importance.

**Loss of autonomy:** Arising from smaller faculties and from departments that were smaller than their counterparts in the other merging institutions, the concern here was that these smaller entities would be usurped into the bigger institution, thus disregarding the efforts of small groups of dedicated academics that have toiled to position their programs, offerings and research areas.

**An overall drop in standards:** Many interview subjects were of the opinion that the merger would lead to a drop in standards, not only in terms of academic standards, but also in terms of student calibre and research output.

**Loss of identity:** Although more emotive in nature, this concern centres around letting go of certain aspects of the merging institutions identity, nature, ethos and culture that individuals from these institutions identify with which, it could be argued, are elements that contribute to one's comfort zone.

**Uncertainty with regard to the meaning of "Comprehensiveness":** As the merger would result in a Comprehensive Institution, the likes of which is hereto unknown, interview subjects seemed to be at odds with the concept of a Comprehensive Institution.

### **Theme 4: Gearing up for the merger**

The pre merger phase implied different things for individuals from the different merging institutions. The pre-merger phase basically spanned 2004, and during this pre-merger phase individuals started interacting with their counterparts from the other merging institutions.

**The Vista incorporation:** The general sentiment was that the incorporation of the Vista campuses into RAU was a relatively smooth process that caused minimal disruption to all involved. The

effect of this incorporation was of concern to ex-Vista staff, stating that during the merger planning phase of 2004, Vista was effectively a non-entity in the TWR/RAU deliberations.

**Paradigm shifts:** A number of interview subjects indicated that their feeling about the merger had changed over time. Exclusively exhibiting a positive change, most subjects ascribe this change to rational self-discourse over time or exposure to merger related information.

**Planning for the merger:** Generally perceived a stressful period for all involved, reflections on the merger planning revealed that the timeframe involved was a limiting factor to proper planning, leading to too many compromises in the interest of expediency. The impression also exists that RAU entered the planning phase being better prepared than their TWR counterparts. In turn, the TWR was perceived as being confrontational, reactive and aggressive during this phase, even by ex-TWR staff members.

**Initial contact:** The merger planning phase was the first time many individuals were exposed to and started interacting with their counterparts from the other merging institutions. Interview subjects reflected that generally this initial contact seemed to very collegial, courteous and business-like. However, this was perceived to be a front for a condescending, antagonistic and aggressive demeanour exhibited by merging partners. Subjects specifically mentioned that ex-RAU staff seemed to view merging partners as inferior; whereas the ex-TWR was viewed as snobbish, brash and confrontational.

**Communication efforts during merger planning:** Perceptions pertaining to formal communicative efforts during the merger planning phase tended to vary greatly and there was no evidence to suggest polarisation of opinion emerging from merging institutions or campuses. Although communication was perceived to be frequent, thus contributing to an awareness of the merger process, the majority of interview subjects reflected that the communicative efforts were not as effective as they could have been.

**Consultation during merger planning:** Some individuals did feel that consultation was cosmetic to an extent, viewing the consultative process as an effort by management at least appear to be consulting with staff. The greatest sentiment expressed, however, was that there was too much consultation taking place. This was deemed to stem from a sensitivity on the side of management to include everybody in the process and a cautious stance of not wanting to offend any party or parties in the process.

**The emergence of politics:** The merger planning phase was accompanied by the first signs of political manoeuvring at all levels from all merging partners. At lower levels, this political manoeuvring was perceived to be limited to obstinacy by parties to drive pertinent positions home. However, interview subjects perceived a lot of political infighting and jockeying for position at top management level. A lot of political manoeuvring can also be ascribed to people slipping into a "survival mode".

**Concerns raised during this period:** The process of merger planning gave rise to further concerns. The perceived cosmetic nature of the consultative process gave rise to the concern that the ordinary staff member has no say or input into the process. Political manoeuvring raised the concern that people, and in particular individuals in top management positions, were acting in their own interests and looking out for themselves, thus not acting in the best interests of neither the institutions they represent nor the institution they are working toward.

## **Theme 5: The roll-out of the process**

Notwithstanding the criticism of the roll-out, staff was of the opinion that it is unfolding better than expected. Many individuals mentioned that merger implementation is dissolving preconceived stereotypes and putting to rest many of the early, emotively driven fears and concerns.

**Attitudinal change in interview subjects:** In addressing the merger planning phase, subjects tended to be rather emotive in their responses. However, when speaking of how the process has been implemented, people started reacting from a more rational frame of mind. Responses portrayed a sensitivity for decisions to be made and processes to be followed. Subjects indicated the implementation phase was tough, with difficulties in integrating the systems and processes; however, this was understandable due to the size and magnitude of the venture.

**The perceived lack of direction:** The most worrying aspect of the roll-out is a perceived lack of direction from management. Hailing from all quarters, this factor was seen as the largest stumbling block the university was faced with. Subjects felt strongly that this lack of direction made planning virtually impossible. However, parties were not blamed for this situation. People laid the blame for this perceived lack of direction at the door of the interim phase.

**Overformalisation:** A significant number of individuals shared the feeling that the university was becoming very formalised, with an increase in the amount of established forums and a plethora of resultant policies.

**"Nothing has changed":** Emanating from both merging partners, many people felt that the pace of change was so slow that no visible change had taken place at operational level and expressed a very pertinent "business as usual" sentiment.

**The "RAU takeover":** Integration was typified by a sentiment that the ex-RAU ethos had perpetuated. This was expressed (mainly) by ex-TWR staff members.

**Levels of roll out:** Research subjects perceived the implementation differently at different hierarchical levels. Subjects' views tended to correspond in viewing the roll-out to be more successful at the higher levels of the hierarchy than at the more operational levels.

### **Theme 6: The current level of institutional integration**

As a fledgling university, one can easily assume that full integration has not yet been achieved.

**The "Us and Them" syndrome:** Interview subjects harboured very strong sentiments of an "us and them" feeling still persisting. To a degree this is understandable, as people still tend to think in the RAU, TWR or Vista mindset.

**A sense of coming together:** It is evident from subjects' responses that much of the political manoeuvring and antagonistic demeanour experienced at lower hierarchical levels during the pre-merger phase has been replaced in this phase by a heightened feeling of comradeship. At the same time it must be noted that individuals were of the opinion that there was still a lot of room for being more accommodating.

**Academic integration:** The new "Comprehensive Institution" had to grapple with how to integrate the academic and vocational approaches to tuition into a coherent system that retained these approaches as "streams", but would allow for movement between the two. As no point of reference exists for such an academic model, UJ is fairing in uncharted waters, and this area is proving to be one of much debate and discussion.

### **Theme 7: The observable effects of change**

A change event will inevitably lead to certain eventualities and situations unique to that specific change event.

**Loss of qualified staff:** Incidence has been recorded of academic staff leaving the employ of UJ and leaving the employ of the merging partners pre-merger. Although this is of concern; it was seen as a natural part of a merger.

**Change readiness of academic staff:** Although fraught with uncertainty and insecurity, all staff interviewed felt that they could handle what was taking place; although in some instances this was associated with people entering a type of survival mode; and in other cases people mentioned that they literally had to refamiliarise themselves with their working environment.

**Diversion of energy:** Along with intense consultation during the pre-merger phase and an increase in committees and other forums, some academic staff are of the opinion that these added duties and responsibilities divert a lot of attention from their tuition and academic duties.

**More rational discourse:** Whereas the pre-merger phase was typified by emotively driven reactions to events, the implementation phase is showed signs of more rational responses and reactions to events.

**A "Soft" transition:** People felt that this merger had been relatively "soft" on staff. Undoubtedly people have exhibited concerns and insecurities but it was not traumatic in terms of job-losses; redeployment, and organisational functioning. Incidence of sporadic and isolated conflict and pettiness have been encountered, but these were not the norm.

## **Theme 8: Management of the UJ**

The following dimensions underpin the nature of managerial efforts at the university:

**The Interim-ness of the current management structure:** Merger implementation was marked by a very definite interim phase. The views aired by interview subjects all tend to converge on an opinion that the perceived slow pace of roll-out and slow pace of integration are directly attributable to the interim phase.

**Democratic management:** Pre-merger consultation was perceived by many to be over democratic to the extent that it slowed progress and action. It is apparent from interview subjects' responses that this situation had perpetuated to the merger implementation phase. Although there was a willingness on the part of management to act democratically and transparently, it tended to be implemented to the extreme and thus actually has a counterproductive effect.

**Task orientation:** Interview subjects mentioned that the current environment of the university necessitates a strong focus on processes and systems that need to be put in place, leading to a distinct task orientation on the part of especially top management.

**Managers in their capacity as leaders:** The fact that people in management positions are required to act as leaders as well, necessitates mention of the leadership efforts of managers here; although leadership has been identified as a separate category in addition to the views expressed here. Generally, interviewed academics observed a startling lack of sound leadership from management, contributing to a lack of direction and common vision.

**A sense of the big picture:** Many individuals observed that fears and concerns amongst staff was attributable to them not being in a position to have a holistic view of the process, a shortcoming that should have been addressed by management in the opinion of staff members.

**Commendable efforts under the circumstances:** Interview subjects felt that, as mergers in Higher Education go, the UJ merger was managed better than other mergers. People felt that many of the preceding "negatives" were not the result of deliberate actions on the part of top management but rather the result of a depleted team that were forced to prioritise eventualities as they arose.

## **Theme 9: Leadership at the UJ**

Interview subjects were of the opinion that leadership efforts had not been very successful in the merger.

**No commonality of effort:** Although there were isolated mentions of various people in leadership positions that were exemplary to interview subjects, it appears that these were isolated and not part of a coherent effort.

**Lack of direction and vision:** The creation of, and ascription to, a vision is seen as an integral part of strategic leadership. As far as interviewed staff are concerned, leaders were found wanting in this respect, another possible result of the interim nature of the implantation phase of the merger.

**Poor communication:** Interview subjects were of the opinion that communication directly from the organisational leadership has also been found wanting, and the perception existed that the university leadership was not in touch with the realities of the rank-and-file.

**Visibility of leaders:** Interview subjects were of the opinion that leaders need to be visible and should be seen as taking the lead, an area where the current university leadership was found wanting.

**Compromising style:** Seen as a result of an over democratic management style, staff were of the opinion that the university leadership was too compromising in their style and not firm enough.

## **Theme 10 Prevalent standards**

Merger implementation afforded subjects the opportunity to witness the conventions in terms of standards prevalent at UJ.

**Academic standards:** Interview subjects indicated that high academic standards were not negotiable, and that institutional agendas such as throughput and increased access to HEI's, presented a fine line between dwindling standards and furthering the cause of these agendas.

**Research related standards:** Although ex-TWR staff tended to share the sentiment that they now have opportunities they didn't have access to as a technician in terms of research, ex-RAU staff felt that the research policies and procedures devised by the university seem to be designed around people that are not used to a research tradition.

### **Theme 11: Communication during merger implementation**

Communication during this phase was deemed to be very impersonal, coupled with the perception that communicative efforts had dwindled as the merger roll-out intensified. Staff commented that the frequency of merger related communication had decreased, which had opened the door for rumours and "grapevine" communication.

### **Theme 12: Concerns raised during merger implementation**

Merger implementation allayed many of the initial fears and concerns, but gave way to further concerns, as people started evaluating their environments more rationally.

**Overformalisation:** Interview subjects felt that the perceived overformalisation stifled creativity and promoted beaurocracy, principles that they feel are at odds with the concept of academic freedom.

**Conditions of service:** Although a harmonised set of Conditions of Service had been signed off by the time the interviews commenced, this news had not filtered through yet. Apart from six academics interviewed, no one was aware of the harmonised Conditions of Service.

**Vast change still to come:** Many of the interview subjects were of the opinion that the change witnessed to date is but a precursor of what can be expected in the not to distant future.

**Workload pressures:** Academics felt that their workloads had increased by the amount of meetings they have to attend and forums they have to serve.

### **Theme 13: The current outlook of academic staff**

The preceding categories detailed hereto culminate in academics sharing similar outlooks and attitudes during the merger implementation phase.

**People have entered survival mode:** A result of feeling overworked, neglected and not having their concerns addressed satisfactorily, some academics tend to retreat and enter a kind of "survival mode".

**Disinterested in the merger process:** Academics do not seem very interested in the process as a whole, citing that academics in general enjoy a high degree of personal autonomy. Therefore, they tend to focus on their tuition and research and tend not to pay much mind to anything beyond these parameters that does not affect them substantively.

**Acceptance of the merger:** Even those staff members who were initially opposed to the idea and overtly expressed their disapproval seem to have shifted their sentiments. This does not mean that these initially negative sentiments have been replaced by extreme optimistic ones. People have either bought into the concept of UJ, or surrendered to the fact that what has been done cannot be reversed.

### **Theme 14: Expectations of the institution**

Resultant from the roll out of the merger process, academic staff are now afforded some insight as to where the university is headed, in a broad sense. For the majority of academic staff members, this equates to dispelling some uncertainties, especially those surrounding the institution as a whole.

**Personal visions:** In an effort to overcome the perceived lack of direction, it seems as though people have constructed (envisioned) their own "ideal state" for the university. Although there is some evidence to suggest that these have crystallised to an extent, and reveal some commonality in a specific localised, geographical setting such as a campus or faculty, there is no evidence to suggest that it has become a "common vision".

**Professional ethos:** Subjects are of the opinion that the "ideal state" that they envisage for the university can only be achieved by a system built around hard working, innovative staff of impeccable integrity and who possess a sense of responsibility and accountability.

**Pursue uniqueness:** Many academics are of the opinion that the asset structure created by the merger has lead to the University of Johannesburg possessing certain areas of uniqueness which sets UJ apart from other HEI's in the area.

**Entrepreneurial focus:** Through the establishment of partnerships and networks, a few interview subjects feel that capacity could be built to generate funds.

### **Theme 15: Expectations of management**

Generically, the expectation was voiced that the correct people should be appointed to managerial posts, taking into account that different skills will be required at different hierarchical levels.



**Expected Characteristics:** Interview subjects tended not only to focus on the task of management but also the persons performing those tasks. The characteristics expected from persons in management positions are supportiveness and sensitivity toward staff; strategic thinking; transparency and honesty.

**An environment conducive to academic excellence:** The distinct expectation was expressed that management create an environment that contributes to job satisfaction, productivity and academic excellence. In this regard, academics express a desire for freedom to perform their tasks and not to be micro-managed. Furthermore, people called for an end to political manoeuvring; power-plays; nepotistic and corrupt actions on the part of people in management positions.

**Consultation:** Although the need was expressed for greater consultation and a move toward greater participative management, subjects felt that these efforts had to be more sincere and transparent.

**Decision making:** Academic staff members feel very strongly that decision making channels should be shorter and that decision making in general be more decisive. There is also a strong call – even from organized labour – for managers to take the “executive decision” where appropriate.

**Strategic direction:** Academics expressed a pertinent expectation for clear and focused strategic direction.

**Communication:** With very few exceptions, interview subjects all expressed a very real need for more effective communication.

### **Theme 16 Expectations of leadership**

Interview subjects tended to make a distinction between managerial efforts and leadership efforts but sentiment tended to converge on the fact that people in managerial positions are expected to act as leaders as well.

**People skills:** Interview subjects feel very strongly that leaders should possess sound people skills. Exhibiting a high degree of overlap with the personal characteristics of managers detailed above, individuals feel that leaders should be honest, transparent, approachable, sensitive and empathic.

**Inspirational:** Arguably the most important aspect of leaders presented by the interview subjects is that leaders should be dynamic and inspire followers. Academic staff members feel that leaders should motivate their followers by possessing the ability to motivate them through action; more specifically decisive, exemplary action.

**Professional:** Interview subjects have expressed the explicit wish for professional conduct from leaders. More specifically, this professional conduct is expressed in terms of the need for leaders to be realistic; realistic in terms of knowing what is expected from them and also in terms of the capabilities of their followers.

### **Theme 17: Micro level expectations**

Within the parameters of micro level expectations, a virtual plethora of expectations have been aired by interview subjects, including the need for a social gathering place, salary increases, cleanliness on certain campuses, upgrading and maintenance of facilities, lack of office space, a uniform language policy, better integration, a research focussed culture and letting go of political agendas.

## **Conclusions Resultant from the Study**

Exploratory (qualitative) research, such as this, typically produces rich data, and hence the themes extracted from the dataset are rich in character. Moreover, apart from generating an array of strong hypotheses for further research of both a qualitative and quantitative nature, the results obtained in this study align substantially with several known knowledge perspectives. Findings indicate that individuals differentiated between what was experienced prior to the effective date of the merger; what transpired thereafter and what they would like to see in future as far as the merger is concerned; implying three discernable time frames – the past, present and future perspectives. The past perspective can be further divided into two discernable phases (one which is emotively driven – reaction to the merger – and the other very much dependent on rational discourse – gearing up for merger). The main findings as they pertain to academics’ experience of these perspective, and their primary implications, are now briefly considered.

## ***The Past perspective***

After announcement of a proposed merger, individuals tend to act overwhelmingly from an emotive frame of reference, which tends to support van Tonder's (2004:181) argument that cognitive processes may be less prevalent during reaction to a change event. Findings indicate that these emotive ***reactions to the merger*** tend to be fuelled by five variables. As the merger was clearly ideologically and politically motivated, disagreement with the **reasons for the merger**, as provided by the government, abounded and gave rise to negative reactions staff. Erikson & Sundgren (2004:10) found this same phenomenon in their study of the merger between the pharmaceutical companies Astra and Zeneca. The lack of information directly following the announcement to merge gave rise to certain unfounded **fears** (Van Der Merwe, 2005), a notion supported in by literature (Papadakis, 2005:241; van Tonder, 2004:177). Staff also tended to see **opportunities** in the UJ merger, and evidence exists that mergers are often seen as providing opportunities for shared learning; collaboration; growth and healing, implying a positive connotation toward a merger (Van Tonder, 2004:163). There were individuals that cited their personal preference for – or fear of – change, which would suggest that a certain **predisposition to change** would be present in individuals, a notion supported by Van Tonder (2004:163). Concerned with the individual's predisposition to change as well as the degree of change readiness exhibited by the individual, this personal outlook toward change shows no dependency (at least in this study) on the other variables which shape reaction to a merger. Evidence suggests that the organisation forms an integral part of people's 'social identity', and in a merger situation the social identity based on the pre-merger organisation becomes salient (Anstey, 2006:360; Shin, 2003:15-16); This concept of **organisational predisposition** links 'social identity' to actual attitude toward the pending merger; as supported – although not so termed – by Shin (2003:54). As the findings indicate, the way individuals perceived the institution they hailed from has a strong influence on individuals' level of job satisfaction. Moreover, a negative predisposition overrode disagreement with reasons to merge, fears associated with the merger and personal outlook.

As merger planning started solidifying, the outlook of staff members seemed to differ considerably from their initial reactions. In this study, ***gearing up for merger*** was associated with heightened rationality and six interrelated variables seem to typify this stage. As time progressed, staff gradually came into contact with merger related information as **the merger planning process** gathered momentum. Foremost here was formal communication embarked upon by the respective merging institutions. Although formal communication was deemed not to be as effective as people would have liked (Van Der Merwe, 2005), it still served a purpose. Supplementing formal communication was information forthcoming from internal and external interest groups; all of which lead to more rational self-debate and discourse. Although there was a feeling that the consultative approach embarked upon was taken a bit too far and contributed to the process being perceived as slow paced; it was cardinal in contributing to more rational discourse on the merger. Time, rationality, and exposure to the merger process culminated in an attitudinal **paradigm shift** amongst staff. One can conclude that these paradigm shifts positively affected the quality of merger planning efforts, as individuals were more focused on the interests of the merged institution. This was, for example, something that was lacking in the merger between Astra and Zeneca (Eriksson & Sundgren, 2004:10). Literature suggests that the merger planning stage be afforded an adequate **planning timeframe** to ensure successful roll-out (Eriksson, 2004:5). The UJ merger was not afforded this luxury, a source of much aggravation for staff; as issues not resolved here filtered through to the merger implementation phase. As the findings indicate, future colleagues did not necessarily welcome each other with open arms. Such experiences of **initial contact** can have a negative impact on planning efforts and milieu in general. Evidence hereof abounds, for example the merger between Volvo Aero and Norwegian Jet Engine (Jonsson, Rovio-Johansson and Kokk, 2004:9). **Politics** is also a relatively common occurrence in large scale change (Eriksson, 2004:4-5), as people want to cling to known conventions. The rational nature of the gearing up stage gave rise to **concerns** based on individuals' experiences. These concerns were based on the process as it was unfolding.

### **The Current perspective**

The implementation phase of the merger gave rise to a very definite outlook surrounding the current state of affairs. The opinions of how the merger was rolling out, coupled with the perceptions of management and leadership, seemed to shape staffs' attitude toward the merger, and toward UJ

**Perceptions of merger roll-out** seemed to change as the merger became more visible and people started gaining an appreciation for what the process demands. The largest source of dissatisfaction during this phase can be ascribed to the interim nature of the merger. The roll-out has also led to the resignation of staff. Although the incidence hereof has been cited by staff as a "negative" of the merger – which of course it is – this has to be seen against the frequency thereof. In the case of UJ, the incidence of resignations due to merger is relatively small and does not involve the top rated academics at the university (Anon, 2005).

**Government; students and community** were not mentioned by interview subjects as impacting on merger implementation. However, they do represent barriers to effective change. Childerhouse identifies five barriers to effective change, one being Industrial Barriers (Childerhouse in Eriksson, 2004:5), where the government; customers and community (amongst others) play an active role in complicating change. **Management during merger implementation** did not only affect the way individuals perceive the roll-out of the merger process, it also seemed to have a direct effect on peoples' attitude toward the merger in general. Staff viewed management as over-democratic (in strong contrast to the London Metropolitan University merger where management was seen as authoritarian (NATFHE, 2005:16)); task orientated; lacking strategic leadership and indecisive. Yet, individuals were of the opinion that the University is being managed better than other HEI mergers; but were sensitive to the fact that the shortcomings were perpetuating uncertainty and negatively impacting on the morale of staff.

**Leadership during merger implementation** was viewed as fragmented, suffering from an overall lack of direction and firmness, poor communication, and a lack of visibility of institutional leadership; all of which are incongruous with 'sound' leadership (Anstey, 2006:358-359; Goldman & Nieuwenhuisen, 2006:100). Staff directed harsh criticism for lack of leadership toward individuals in top management. The London Metropolitan University merger (NATFHE, 2005:14) presents a similar picture, showing that lack of leadership is not unique to UJ.

**The attitude of staff** is surprisingly positive, especially when viewed against the negative perceptions of managerial and leadership efforts. This is at odds with the belief that sound leadership is a prerequisite for positively guiding staff through times of change. People do, however, seem to be losing interest in the process and feel that they are experiencing an increase in workloads, an occurrence also reported by Fulop, et al (2005:129) in their study of mergers in the British health care sector. Lack of direction has seen staff entering 'survival mode'; where people do what is expected – a notion also cited by van Tonder (2004:179). **Concerns raised during this period** are the result of what individuals experience and perceive in terms of management, leadership and the roll-out of the merger process. These should be of prime interest to management of the university, as these have the potential of evolving to sources of discontentment and dissatisfaction.

### **The Future perspective**

The current shortcomings, inefficiencies, uncertainties and demands created by the merger, appear to be unpleasanties that will eventually culminate in "something better". This tentatively optimistic stance should be seen against the sentiment that certain expectations should be addressed in future. These expectations can be seen as having a definite influence on how individuals see the future roll-out of the merger.

**Personal visions** seem to have emerged due to the apparent lack of direction. These visions are somewhat varied, fragmented and cannot be regarded as "shared". Although it could be argued that the existence of such visions could be problematic – especially when materially at odds with formal organisational direction – they seem to have fulfilled a purpose in that they seemingly represent individuals' "ideal state" for the university and act as a guiding force for current and future behaviour. These fragmented visions resonate with Ghoshal and Bartlett's (in Antsey, 2006) proposition that effective organisations do not simply emerge from restructuring, but are rather the product of changed mindsets and behaviours of the people who work within them.

Interview subjects also held strong **expectations of management**, as they felt strongly that the management of the university be comprised of people of sound character, create an atmosphere

conducive to academic excellence, adopt a consultative approach, possess the ability to set a strategic direction and make decisions and must be able to communicate effectively with staff. These expectations of management are echoed – almost verbatim – by Swanepoel (2003). Sapienza (2005), in a study of the expectations of management in various R&D/scientific environments, came to strikingly similar insights – management was expected to be able to communicate effectively; to listen well; be well organised; to solve conflicts and be a good role model. The findings further point to the fact that if individuals' "ideal states" are to be fulfilled, management has to live up to the expectations academics have of them.

**Leadership** is seen as crucial for the future of the university, a point also stressed by Swanepoel (2003). Interview subjects expect leaders at the University to be inspirational, professional and to possess sound people skills, characteristics also deemed crucial from literature (Anstey, 2006; Goldman & Nieuwenhuizen, 2006; Lewis, *et al*, 2001; Robbins, 2001). Individuals have an explicit desire for inspirational, charismatic and transformational leaders that can meet the challenges of higher education in South Africa and take the university forward.

The label "**Workplace Expectations**" has been assigned to all other expectations individual staff members hold that have not been discussed. From the findings it is evident that a vast array of different expectations exists amongst academics at UJ and none of them warranted inclusion as a pertinent category. Literature makes little mention of the role of staffs' expectations *per se* in mergers, although Bourantas and Nicandrou, (1997) state that expectations refer to beliefs regarding a persons' future status, irrespective of the desirability thereof. As such, expectations can be seen as a function of rewards and costs resulting from affiliation with a particular organisation.

## **An integrated framework depicting individual experience of the UJ merger: The Reflective Experience of Mergers (REM) theory**

The three perspectives discussed in Section 5 represent different moments in the UJ merger, as experienced by academic staff of the University. Therefore, these three perspectives need to be drawn together in a collective whole which views the changes in merger experiences as time progresses. Thus a theory grounded in empiricism emerges in respect of academics' experiences of the UJ merger. One of the most salient features of this theory is that it indicates the adoption of a temporal perspective to the academics' experience of the merger, thus allowing changes in these experiences over time to surface more visibly.

This theory, with the associated knowledge framework, is referred to simply as the Reflective Experience of Mergers Theory, or REM-theory. This integrated theory of academics' experience of a merger over time is depicted in Figure 1 and indicates the factors and variables that shape individual disposition in different phases of the merger. The REM-theory views the time from the announcement of the merger, through the current point in time and into the future.

The Past perspective spans the time from merger announcement to the date that the merger takes effect, and comprises two discernable stages. Firstly, the emotive Reaction Stage depicts how individuals' outlook and perceptions of the UJ merger were shaped directly after the announcement of the merger. This stage is comprised of five variables, namely:

- Non-acceptance of the reasons provided for the merger
- Fears and concerns associated with the merger
- Opportunities presented by the merger
- Personal outlook toward change, and
- Institutional Predisposition

The second stage that constitutes the Past perspective – the Preparation Stage – comes about over time as individuals are exposed to merger related initiatives and enter into rational discourse and self debate concerning the merger. The transition from Reaction Stage to Preparation Stage cannot be attributable to any specific point in time (hence the dotted line between these two stages in Figure 1). The Preparation Stage is comprised of six variables:

- Initial contact with merging partners
- Concerns forthcoming from merger preparation
- Personal paradigms
- The merger planning process
- Politics, and

- The planning timeframe afforded for the merger

The second perspective is the Current perspective and spans the period from the date of the merger to the current point in time and represents currency in terms of status quo rather than currency of time. This is due to the possibility that the current status quo could have persisted for an amount of time. During this Perspective, the attitudes of staff toward the merger are shaped by a complex interaction of four variables:

- **Perceptions of roll-out**, (influenced by the role government; students and the community play in the merger).
- **Perceptions of Management and Leadership** (collectively be referred to as Institutional Management) have an impact on the individuals' perception of roll-out but is also shaped by concerns resultant from roll-out.
- Roll-out of merger implementation is associated with **concerns** about the process.
- The **feelings and emotions** of staff permeate through this perspective and have a marked influence on the attitudes of staff toward the merger.

The Future perspective investigates the expectations that individuals have toward the future of the merger (and of the University). This perspective purports that these expectations individuals hold about the future direction of the merger and the institution as a whole are indicative of their perceptions of future merger roll-out. The Future perspective is shaped by three variables:

- Visions of the future for the institution,
- Future expectations of management and leadership
- Workplace expectations (Note that these workplace expectations are also impacted by the overall attitudes of staff (resultant from the "Current" perspective)

As the individual moves through these perspectives over time, emotive reaction gives way to more rational thought; familiarity with the merger environment and eventually even demands in terms of future expectations. The disposition held by individuals in the past cannot be discarded; it plays a large role in shaping current attitudes, perceptions and outlook which, in turn, will have a profound effect on future expectations.

Although it has been stated that the REM-theory suggests that initial, emotive reactions give way to more rationality in outlook toward the merger over time, this is seemingly true of the holistic picture presented by the REM-theory. This must be seen against the backdrop of feelings and emotions during the Current perspective, which suggests that a marked sense of optimism directly prior to merger was replaced by emotional stress during the roll-out of the merger; which could be argued to represent digression to a heightened emotional state. The premise here is that over time, and with the benefit of experience and more information of the merger, emotional distress is not merely the product of people jumping to irrational conclusions.

It is noticeable from Figure 1 that especially the Future perspective seems somewhat sparse in comparison to the complexity of the Past and Current perspectives. This prompted the data to be revisited in quite some detail; which revealed that these findings had been accurately captured. An explanation for this paucity could be that people tend to remember, and reflect on, events that are important to them. It would be difficult for people to reflect on possible outcomes of the future, as the future has not impacted upon them yet. This highlights the difficulties in conducting merger related research focused on the future, especially from the perspective of those experiencing the merger.

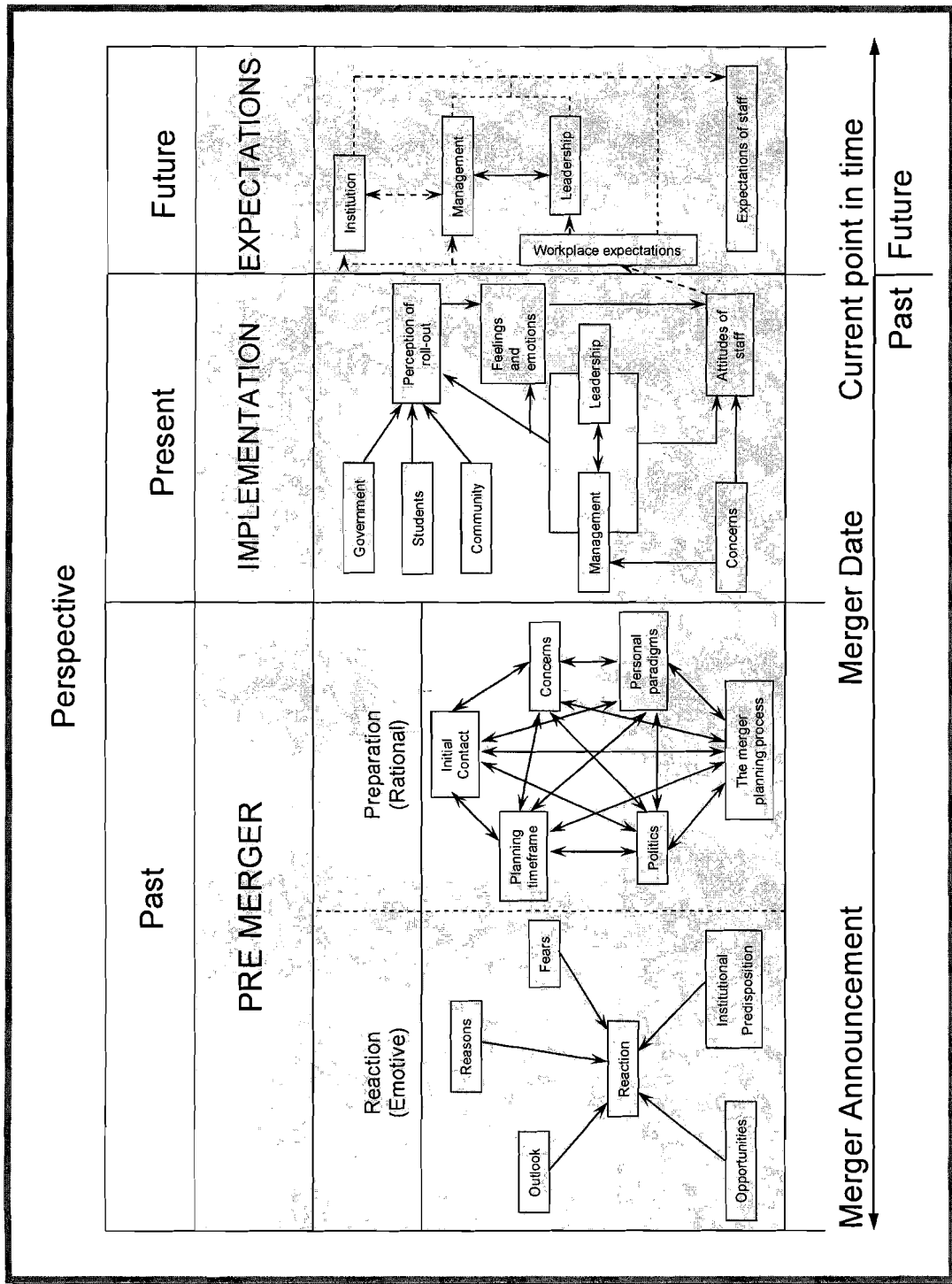


Figure 1: The Reflective Experience of Mergers (REM) theory

When viewing the graphic representation of the REM-theory in Figure 1 the points in time indicated directly below the model are dependant on the merger plan for the University. The point "Merger Announcement" represents the point in time when the merger became public knowledge, i.e. 30 May 2002. The point "Merger Date" represents the date the historic institutions ceased to exist and when the University of Johannesburg officially came into being, this being 1 January 2005. The "Current point in time", however, does not represent a fixed point in time but is indicative of the relevant data used. In

the case, this equates to December 2005. This does not mean that the variables used to describe the Current and Future perspectives were outdated at the time this paper was finalised, but it does mean that these variables might be described slightly differently as the merger process unfolds.

## Managerial Implications

The study revealed that the principle of the merger is a concept that staff are still grappling to come to terms with. Although there is acceptance of the merger, it is more of 'giving in' to the idea rather than firm belief in the idea. Although the sentiment seems to be positive on the surface, there are still many reservations, and very few subjects are overtly of the opinion that they believe in the UJ. This is an area that necessitates the intervention of strong strategic leadership; as only a firm and decisive leadership corps can stimulate true buy-in to the idea of the UJ.

Also evident from the findings was the way individuals perceived the institution they hailed from and the effect this had on the individuals' level of job satisfaction. The more favourable this institutional predisposition, the less favourable individuals tended to be to the announcement of the merger. As organisational predisposition is a product of entrenched attitudes, it is not something that disappears when a new institution such as UJ is born out of a merger. The challenge that the management of the university is faced with is to harness this organisational predisposition as point of departure to inculcate an organisational disposition amongst staff toward the UJ.

Although the consultative process of merger planning was both positively and negatively perceived by academics, negative perceptions hereof can do more harm than positive perceptions can add value. Seen as an essential element in creating buy-in into the UJ-idea and for inculcating an organisational disposition toward UJ, all-inclusive and genuine consultation on the correct issues is sorely needed at UJ. This would necessitate innovative ways of consulting with all stakeholders. Although formal communications are deemed to be both successful and unsuccessful by academics, one has to admit that the negative sentiment uttered is cause to improve these efforts. The evidence suggests that there is a definite need for more focused, operational level communication as well as more intensive communication.

## Concluding Remarks

To date, the extant literature appears to have directed scant attention to individual experiences of a merger. More detailed knowledge of how individuals experience a merger will enable business leaders to tailor change management interventions to negate the effect of these often overlooked human aspects of large-scale change and facilitate more effective execution of the merger.

Although not a 'conventional' merger due to the ideological motivation behind it, the UJ case has relevance to mergers worldwide; as at the end of the day employees react to change, not the reason for the change. As HEI's worldwide are experiencing change (mergers have occurred in the UK and Germany; German speaking countries are experiencing changing academic rules and regulations, and HEI's in New Zealand are in a state of restructuring); the case definitely has a global application.

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