



## **Merger as an Instrument to achieve Quality in Higher Education - Rhetoric or Reality?**

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## ***Abstract***

### **Merger as an Instrument to achieve Quality in Higher Education - Rhetoric or Reality?**

Since autumn 2013 a new government has been in place in Norway. A main message from the new Minister in Education and Research has been that the structure in Higher Education should be governed by Quality. Both excellence and diversity is required, in the sense that excellence requires a solid basis. It is not clear what this statement actually means in practice, but one hypothesis is that mergers again will have a central role in such a reorganization process. However, one fundamental question to ask is then to what degree merger is the right “medicine” to create a qualitatively improved higher education sector in Norway. The experiences from previous mergers in Norway and in several other countries are quite mixed, and to a large extent dependent on strategy, choice and type of merger. This paper intends to analyze successful merger strategies with respect to quality and diversity in Higher Education from an authority policy point of view, and to indicate what should possibly be highlighted in the forthcoming Norwegian Higher Education reorganization.

## **Presentation**

### **Merger as an Instrument to achieve Quality in Higher Education – Rhetoric or Reality?**

#### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

Mergers between higher education institutions have been a widespread phenomenon world-wide in the last decades. Several countries have used and still use mergers as an instrument to restructure their higher education system; e.g. UK, Australia, Norway, Denmark, Finland, China, USA, South Africa and Russia (Goedegebuure 1992; 2012; Harman and Harman 2003; 2008; Harman and Meek 2002; HEFCE 2012; Skodvin 1999; Puusa and Kekäle 2012). The political signal from Norway's new Conservative government (since autumn 2013) indicates that a forthcoming reorganization of the Norwegian Higher education sector with the aim of increasing quality in Higher Education (HE) is most likely. Furthermore, merger seems once again to be the tool. There is a clear political statement to reduce the number of higher education institutions (HEIs); it is indicated that Norway should concentrate its academic, economic and administrative resources into larger and more competitive units through collaboration, alliances and mergers (CAM).

The main message from the new Minister of Education and Research has been that the structure in Higher Education should be governed by quality. Both excellence and diversity are required, in the sense that excellence requires a solid basis.

The previous (Social Democratic) government also expressed concern about a vulnerable HE structure in Norway. Too many of the HEIs are vulnerable – small and academically fragmented. Their strategy was to focus on cooperation, specialization, concentration and division of labour among the higher education institutions (HEIs) on a voluntary basis. Several processes started up, but so far with rather poor results.

The new Conservative government has added one more factor in this strategy, namely merger as an instrument to achieve quality in HE. The criteria for this strategy (Collaboration, specialization, concentration, division of labour and **mergers** among the HEIs) are: Quality, Robustness and Efficiency.

However, one fundamental question then is to what degree merger is the right “medicine” for creating a qualitatively improved higher education sector in Norway. The experiences from previous mergers in Norway and in several other countries are quite mixed, and to a large extent dependent on strategy, choice and type of merger.

This paper intends to analyse successful merger strategies with respect to quality and diversity in HE from an authority policy point of view, and to indicate what should possibly be highlighted in the forthcoming Norwegian Higher Education reorganization. Based on international research literature on mergers, I will document, elaborate and discuss advantages and disadvantages with different models.

Finally, I will try to sum up with lessons learned from international experience with mergers, and some recommendations addressing:

- How to succeed: Successful models and strategies (e.g. diversification versus integration)
- Realistic expectations on the outcomes of the mergers (administratively, economically and academically)
- Elements that characterize a successful merger (e.g. geography, culture, management and leadership, top-down versus bottom up organizational strategies, type of partners involved in the merger)

## **The Norwegian context**

What kind of HEIs does Norway actually want in the years to come? Today, Norway has, in reality, a sort of flexible and “transparent binary HE-system”, with universities (including specialized universities) on the one side, and university colleges on the other side. However, up until now the university colleges can qualify for university status if they fulfill certain national academic standards and criteria – therefore called flexible and “transparent binary system”. The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) is responsible for such institutional accreditation processes (Skodvin 2012). But it is important to underline that mergers between universities and university colleges (cross-sectoral mergers) are permitted and not subject to NOKUT’s Quality Assurance and Enhancement. (E.g. in January 2009 the University of Tromsø merged with the University College of Tromsø, and in August 2013 the University merged with the University College of Finnmark). Cross-sectoral mergers are prohibited in several countries (e.g. the Netherlands, Germany, and Finland), because they are perceived as a “short-cut” to achieve sufficient quality. Thus, it is reasonable to ask whether it is a strength or a weakness with respect to the quality dimension that Norway permits cross-sectoral mergers. If (or if not), what does qualitatively separate the HEI system in Norway from e.g. the systems in the Netherlands, Finland and Germany?

However, the new Government has recently stated that no new universities will be established in the near future. Does this mean a consolidation of today’s structure and division of labour between universities and university colleges, or the start of a completely new reorganization of the Norwegian HE-sector?

Connected to the last issue, the Norwegian higher education authorities have quite recently developed a tool based on public register data to describe and compare the different institutional profiles in our system, the diversity in the HE-system – that can be a useful instrument in a very likely state-initiated merger-process.

Norway is in a unique position due to the National Database for Statistics on Higher Education (DBH). Statistical information on the institutional level is reported from all the HEIs to the DBH, and with some preparation, it provides almost all the indicators that are required in the classification system (U-Map). The Ministry is responsible for gathering data on the institutional profiles in our HE system, while NOKUT in cooperation with the DBH has developed profiles of different academic fields (Medicine, Political Science etc.) within the HEIs (Skodvin 2012; Bakken and Storm 2013). This paper intends to give some examples of how such institutional profiles (based on quality indicators) can be used to indicate strengths and weakness in different types of HEIs and as a starting point for elaborating potential mergers in the future.

## **What is a merger?**

A merger reflects two or more previously separate institutions into one new single institution, which may retain the name and legal status of one of them or be an entirely new legal entity. Federations can be seen as a more flexible version of full merger. In addition we can find “weaker” forms such as alliance and collaboration<sup>2</sup> (HEFCE 2012). In this paper we will only focus on real mergers.

When we are discussing who initiated the mergers, it can be useful to differentiate between forced and voluntary mergers.

Voluntary or what Goedegebuure (2012) characterizes as incidental mergers mean that the institutions themselves have initiated the merger. Forced or policy induced mergers, on the other hand, are when the instigator of the merger is external to the institutions. Thus, the forthcoming merger process in Norway is in the last category. However, it may sometimes be difficult to ascertain whether the merger is voluntary or forced. The voluntary ones are often forced by circumstances (Skodvin 1999).

It is often a mix of different types of institutions which are involved in merger processes in HE. Goedegebuure (1992, p. 24) distinguishes between four different types of mergers; horizontal, vertical, diversification and conglomerate.

This typology is connected to two different types of dimensions, where the first is the HEIs academic affiliation and the second the HEIs product orientation. HE has two types of products; education and research. On the basis of these dimensions, the following four types of mergers in Higher Education can be identified: a) Horizontal mergers between institutions which operate in similar academic fields (mono disciplinary) towards production of a similar type of product (e.g. education); b) Vertical mergers between institutions which operate in similar academic fields but are oriented towards different types of products (e.g. a technical university and an engineering polytechnic); c) Diversification mergers between institutions which operate in different academic fields and are oriented towards similar types of products (e.g. a university college that offers education in economics and a university college that offers education in engineering); d) Conglomerate mergers between institutions which operate in different academic fields and are oriented towards different kinds of products (e.g. a comprehensive university and a polytechnic).

When it comes to the type of mergers that have occurred most frequently, this varies from country to country. Since mergers in a number of countries (e.g. The Netherlands and Finland) are only allowed for similar type of HEIs, we can only distinguish between horizontal and diversification mergers. However, in countries like Australia, UK, Hungary and Norway, we find examples on all four types of mergers, also so called cross-sectoral mergers. In Norway, cross-sectoral mergers (merger between university and University College) have obviously been a shortcut to achieve university status for University Colleges, in the sense that they do not have to qualify for university status after NOKUT's (Norwegian Quality Assurance Agency in Education) standards and criteria.

### **Why merging?**

The literature on higher education mergers underlines the fact that merging denotes radical change. Not only are the governing systems of the institutions affected, but the "souls" of the partners involved are also affected and they have to relate to the process of change. The institutional changes include the abandonment of existing forms of governance, change in institutional norms, objectives and academic programs (e.g. Mulvey 1993; Skodvin 1999; Harman and Harman 2003; HEFCE 2012; Kyvik and Stensaker 2013).

There is a widespread agreement that merging processes rarely or never have a smooth path. But despite this, mergers are used to create organizational change both at macro (national) and micro (institutional) level. Why then is this the case?

A natural explanation is that the external instigators and/or participants generally think that it is more advantageous than disadvantageous. There are both similarities and dissimilarities in the reasons for merging in different countries: from resolving financial exigency to more strategic reasons like e.g. ambitions to improve the institution's position in the higher education hierarchy (regionally, nationally and internationally).

But regardless of motives, the main force behind a merger is always some kind of assumed gain. The main driving force appears to be the maximization of economies of scale and the hope of achieving administrative, economic and academic benefits by merging several institutions into a larger unit. There is an intention to gain administrative benefits (e.g. economies of scale with regard to number of administrators, a more professional and efficient administration, and to improve the use of infrastructure

and the use of physical facilities). Secondly, the intention is economic benefits – to save money, and thirdly academic benefits.

Academically, there are at least four sub-intentions:

- Eliminating duplicative programs
- Strengthening research and teaching
- Increasing academic integration and collaboration, e.g. creating new multi- and interdisciplinary fields
- Diversifying academic profiles, e.g. a merger between institutions that complement each other can strengthen the new institution's position in the national and international higher education market.

### **The outcomes of mergers**

The international (as well as national) experiences with mergers are quite mixed. If we try to generalize on the basis of international empirical data in the field, we can say that mergers have generally led to a strengthening in terms of governance, management and administration. This particularly pertains to the administration, which usually becomes more professional and efficient. Economies of scale with regard to the number of administrators are, in contrast, less common. In spite of larger units where some duplicative administrative functions have been eliminated, mergers have not resulted in fewer administrators in total, rather the opposite. This applies to both multi-campus/network organizations as well as HEIs that are physically located in the same place (e.g. Skodvin 1999; Harman & Harman 2003; HEFCE 2012).

The latter is due to several reasons. In many countries (e.g. the Scandinavian) it is difficult to fire people who have permanent positions; logically this makes it difficult to rationalize staff numbers. Second, it has been argued that when an administration has reached a certain size, it becomes almost self-generating, which in turn creates arguments for more work for its own sake, so called structural differentiation (Blau 1973). When organizations grow, they usually become more complex with a distribution of new tasks and units. Complexity can occur horizontally (i.e. a distribution in many departments, sub-departments and centres); it can occur vertically through different management levels (e.g. central administration and disciplinary/local administration); and it can occur geographically (geographically spread units). A logical consequence of horizontal, vertical, and geographical differentiation is that newly merged institutions will need more administrative resources in order to keep the organization together. The different activities of the organization must be coordinated and controlled; the emphasis will be put on the activities in proportion to the size of the organization (Mintzberg 1983).

Mergers are also intended to save money. This intention has rarely been met, at least not in the short term. Mergers require a lot of resources for planning, coordination and physical infrastructure, especially in the implementation phase. But in the long run, there may be some economies of scale. This is especially relevant with regard to common library systems, ICT-systems, management systems and other administrative systems (Skodvin 1999; Harman & Harman 2003; HEFCE 2012).

The most important intention with mergers is to create better academic institutions. This pertains to both teaching and research. In this respect, experiences are mixed. There are, however, clear indications that mergers improve the future academic position of the new institutions, especially with regard to the breadth of educational provision. Mergers in Australia, USA, Norway and the Netherlands have created broader and more multidisciplinary course programs which still function well today. Complementary expertise among the staff may provide the basis for expanding the number of subjects offered both in width and in depth

(e.g. PhD-program) (e.g. Kyvik and Stensaker 2013; Ursin et al 2010; Mulvey 1992; Goedegebuure 1999; Harman and Harman 2008).

But it has to be underlined that the academic effects depend on the purpose of the mergers. Generally, (voluntary) mergers between institutions that were academically complementary to each other, were often more successful than mergers with a strategy to eliminate duplicative programs and increased academic integration. The greater the differences are in regard to size and course programmes between the involved institutions, the greater the probability that the mergers will be successful. They balance each other out and give more breadth and choice to their students.

But if the strategy for a merged institution was to reach increased academic integration and cooperation, there were often problems compounded by large geographical distances between the various academic environments (Mulvey 1993; Goedegebuure 1992; Skodvin 1999; Norgard and Skodvin 2002; Pinheiro et al. 2013).

General challenges with mergers are that they are often connected to stress, fear, and in part inadequate planning at all levels. This has created tensions that usually have a long term effect on the academic development of the new institution. Such tensions are related to issues about teaching versus research, different competency profiles, identity and autonomy, and for some countries also vocational/professional education versus academia.

But with regard to the level of problems and conflicts we can differentiate between integration and diversification strategies. The first strategy – mergers where the intention is increased academic integration and cooperation (e.g. creating new multi- or interdisciplinary programs/fields) is usually much more controversial than mergers where the main strategy is to diversify the academic profiles (e.g. a merger between institutions that complement each other). In mergers where the main strategy was to increase academic integration and collaboration, problems were often created between different academic cultures; which again hindered a positive academic development. At some institutions the integration goals have been achieved to a certain degree, but on the whole the strategy has not been successful. There are many complex reasons behind this lack of academic integration and collaboration. First, it is difficult to establish coordination between different cultures and traditions. Second, for multi-campus institutions in particular, it is difficult to establish coordination over distance. Success is to some degree dependent on geographical proximity. Third, more academic integration also requires more investment (funding), which is often underestimated by the institution, and in state initiated reorganizations, also by educational authorities. A general experience is that economic flexibility and sufficient access to resources is of huge importance in a reorganization process, especially during the implementation phase (e.g. Harman 1996; Skodvin 1999; Harman & Harman 2003; Goedegebuure 2011; HEFCE 2012).

### **Mapping institutional profiles of academic fields in Norwegian HE – a possible tool?**

Inspired by the European U-Map Project (see [www.u-map.eu](http://www.u-map.eu)), the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research developed a model or classification system for displaying the individual HEI's profile in 2010. Like the U-Map Project, this is a non-hierarchical approach. The purpose is to raise awareness and trigger reflection on institutional characteristics. Each HEI's profile is expressed as a flower, and the typology is also called the "flower project" (Skodvin 2012; Bakken and Storm 2013).

Norway is in a unique position through the National Database for Statistics on Higher Education (DBH)<sup>3</sup>. Statistical information on the institutional level is reported from all the HEIs to the DBH, and with some preparation, it provides almost all the indicators that are required in the classification system (U-Map) (see

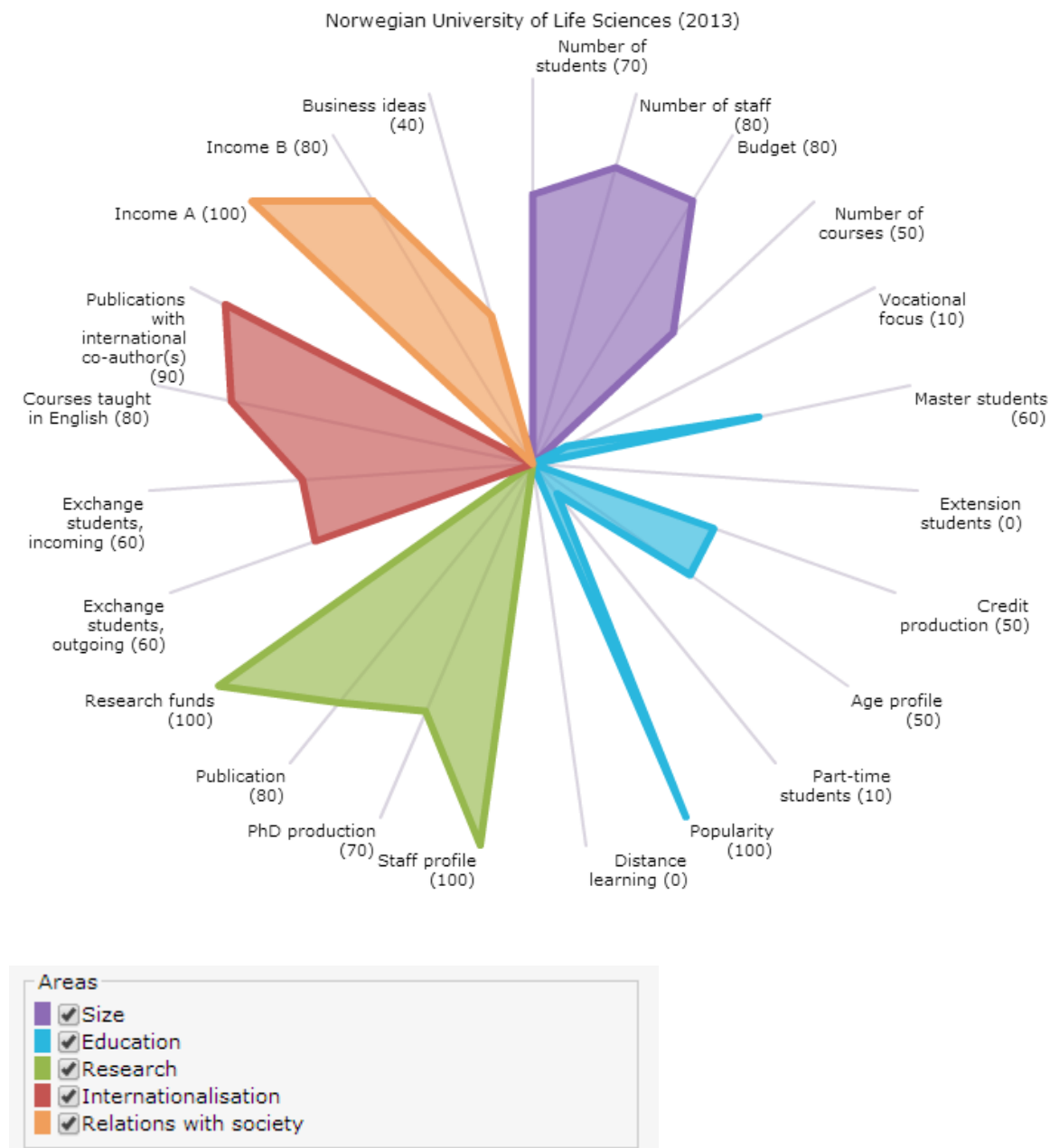
<http://dbh.nsd.uib.no>). The Ministry is responsible for gathering data on the institutional profiles in our HEI system, while the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) in cooperation with the DBH has developed profiles of different academic fields (Medicine, Political Science etc.) within the HEIs (Skodvin 2012, p. 930-932).

The indicators comprise those that are part of the national funding system, performance indicators that are reported to the Ministry, and other indicators that are part of the quality assurance procedures. “The flower project” shows roughly the institutional profiles we have in the Norwegian higher education system. The classification system is operating with five dimensions (size, education, research, internationalization and relations to society) and a total of 23 indicators (2013). Figure 1 illustrates the institutional profile of a Norwegian University.

The visualization of institutional profiles can be said to be the petals of a flower. Each petal represents a dimension or indicator area with its unique colour. Each dimension has its set of indicators. In the flowers – the “Education” field has a blue colour, “Research” is green, “Internationalisation” is red, “Relations with society” is orange, and the “Institutional size” is purple. The scale used runs from 0 to 100 (<http://dbh.nsd.uib.no/>; Skodvin, 2012, p. 905–934).



Figure 1: Illustration of the institutional profile of a Norwegian University.



Mapping different institutional profiles of the HEIs, can be a useful tool for different stakeholders (e.g. the authorities, the leadership and staff in HEIs etc.) in an eventually start-up phase in forthcoming merger processes. It gives a snapshot of an institutions strengths and weakness with regard to e.g. education, research and internationalisation.

A previous review of institutional profiles showed us that Norway has a relatively diverse higher education system (Skodvin 2012, p. 928 - 932). But in e.g. a merger situation, where the strategy is to use a diversification strategy, it is important to underline that these institutional profiles do not give us enough evidence to determine whether the different HEIs complement each other. For this we need the different academic profiles within each HEI, and development over a longer time span. Building on the same logic as the institutional profiles in the “Flower-project”, NOKUT and DBH developed in 2013 a classification system to view academic field profiles (fields of education) within the Norwegian HEIs, that is suitable and useful as an instrument in the mapping phase of an eventually merger process. The model operates with five dimensions/indicator areas in the “academic field flowers”, based on student register data:

1. Size
  - a. Number of students
  - b. Number of programs
2. Education admission (Intake)
  - a. Student popularity
  - b. Quality of admitted students (average entry marks)
3. Education program/course profile
  - a. Master's degree students (proportion of Master's degree students by the total number of students at the institution)
  - b. Vocational-/professional –oriented profile (vocational focus)
  - c. Distance learning students
4. Performance/results
  - a. Students credit point production
  - b. Failed exams
  - c. A+B marks
5. Internationalisation
  - a. Exchange students, outgoing
  - b. Exchange students, incoming
  - c. Programmes taught in a foreign language

In the ongoing Norwegian CAM process, I will use the three HEIs in the county of Møre og Romsdal, the University Colleges (UC) of Ålesund<sup>4</sup>, Volda and Molde, as an example on how we can get useful information from institutional and academic field profiles to consider the possibilities for a future merger. This merger process has a history that goes back to the turn of the century, when it was established a voluntary alliance for committed collaboration and a possible future merger, the establishment of a new university. This so called "Møre alliances», is strongly encouraged by regional political authorities, but until now, the negotiations between the three HEIs have not been successful (Kyvik and Stensaker 2013, p. 330).

The three HEIs complement each other to a large degree regarding their study portfolio and academic fields (fields of education), so this will obviously be an example of a diversified merger strategy. However, there is an exception. Molde UC and Ålesund UC (which geographically is located quite close to each other – a fjord is dividing them), do both offer large nursing educations, which in practice compete with each other. In a possible future merger, there will therefore be wise to elaborate integration between these two nursing educations.

The institutional profiles in figure 2 illustrates that Molde UC is more research intensive and has a larger share of its education portfolio at master and PhD levels than Volda UC and especially Ålesund UC. The latter has a pure vocational orientation, while the others have a mix of academic and vocational orientation.

Figure 2: Institutional profile of University College of Molde, University College of Ålesund and University College of Volda.

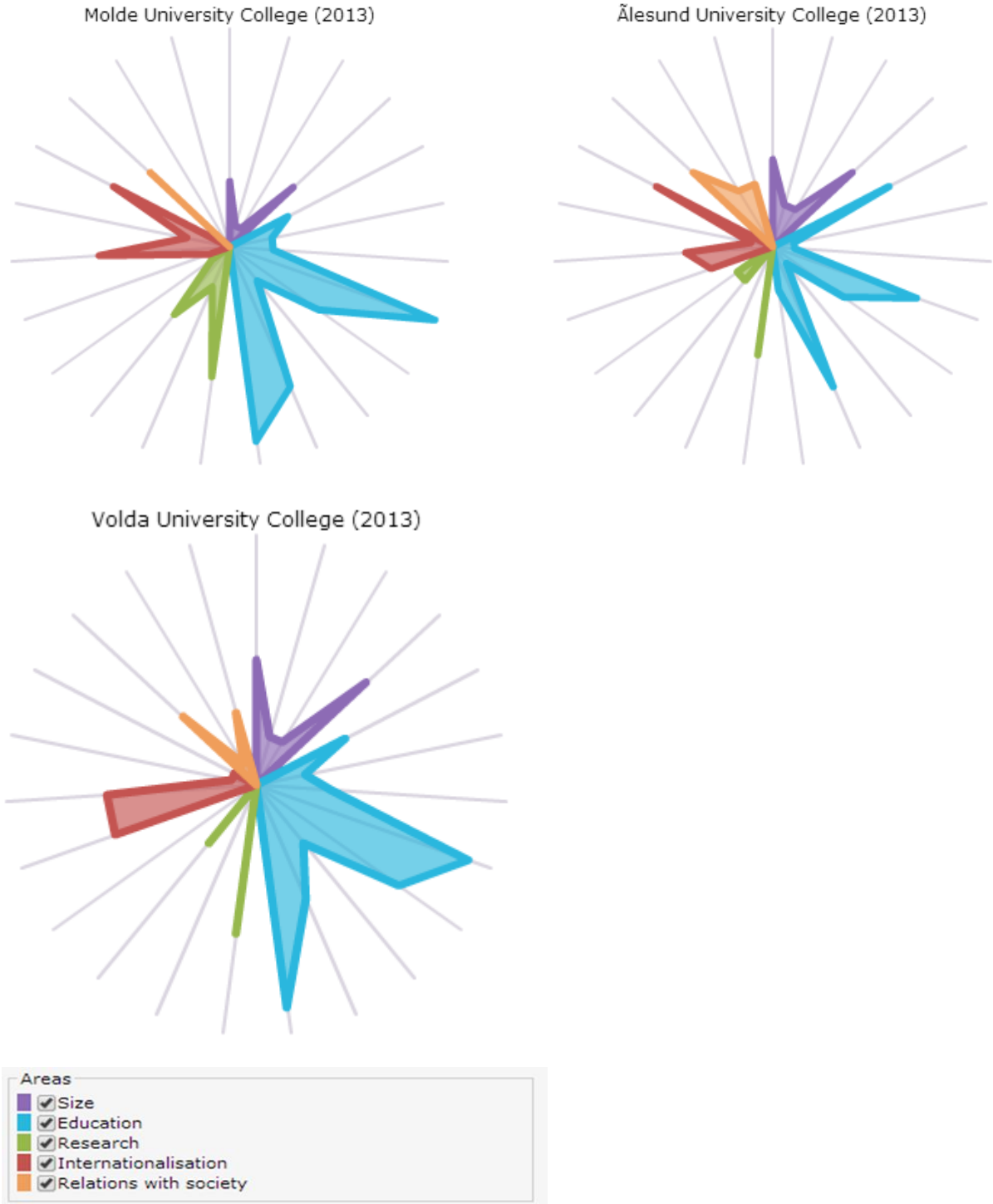


Figure 3 visualises the profile in the educational field of Health and welfare in respectively Molde UC and Ålesund UC. (Nursing is the dominating this educational field in both institutions).

Figure 3: The profile within the educational field of Health and welfare in Molde UC and Ålesund UC.



The profile within this educational field indicates that both institutions struggle with their popularity – ability to attract qualified students. Both Molde UC and Ålesund UC have approximately only one qualified applicant per study place. In addition they are both quite small – respectively around 500 (Ålesund) and 600

students (Molde). With regard to the students' performance/results, the indicators indicate that Molde UC has slightly better results than Ålesund UC.

### **How to succeed?**

To sum up, we can say that mergers of HEIs are complex, time-consuming and difficult processes which require negotiation and detailed planning. In the Norwegian context, this applies to both the public HEIs and the Ministry of Education and Research.

For the HEIs, the status of different departments and academic faculty are often the most difficult obstacles to the process of merger. Necessary factors for successful mergers are leadership, strategic planning, the use of committees whose members are constitutive of the whole institution and emphasis on positive end results.

Effective management during a merger plays an important role in ensuring that the organization is implementing this change according to plan and in reducing the levels of ambiguity and stressfulness associated with the merger. If leaders are able to convey a clear vision of the nature and destiny of the merged organization, are attentive to employees' concerns, and communicate clear guidelines of how this change could be managed, the employees should regard the event as low in stressfulness and high in control (Puusa and Kekäle 2012).

The degree of tensions and conflict with regard to academic development depends on the kind of strategy that has been chosen. The diversification strategy is (as mentioned) usually more successful than the integration strategy (e.g. Skodvin 1999; HEFCE 2012; Pinheiro et. al. 2013; Kyvik and Stensaker 2013).

Furthermore, we can distinguish between strategies as a "bottom up" process, a "top-down" process, or a combination of both. Top-down processes are most common (most of the state-initiated mergers) – but they are often connected to a lot of tensions and conflicts among the both administrative and academic staff.

Merger processes that use a strategy with a high degree of "bottom up" input are often smooth and successful (e.g. Skodvin 1999; HEFCE 2012). There are a lot of reasons for this: first, the newly merged institution has a better chance to create consensus among partners, and second, it is the best strategy to try to create a common identity among new staff members. As participants in the process, they are strongly motivated to gain consensus for the future goals of the new institution. However, academic staff is often more committed to their work and their professional identity than their HEI.

The degree of voluntariness also seems to have an impact on the mergers. Experience has shown that the voluntary mergers usually are more successful than "forced" mergers. This is often mainly due to the fact that state-initiated mergers are initiated by educational authorities and not requested as such by the employees of the different HEIs.

Another characteristic of a merger process is that it is time consuming; it often takes place in the context of a tight time frame. In a merger, the problem tends to be that too much happens in too short time (Fielden and Markham 1997; HEFCE 2012; Millet 1976).

### **Success factors for Higher Education Institutions**

It is essential to the success of a merger that the institution has a goal, vision or mission statement which is shared by all. The HEIs have to develop a strategic plan that justifies why changes are needed, and a common platform must be created between the merging institutions. Furthermore, there must be a desire

to merge among staff and willingness to cooperate and compromise between the parties involved. It is of huge importance to start with the academic ambition for the new merged institution.

Furthermore, results from many studies in different countries indicate that a successful merger is above all characterized by visible and strong management which is able to unite the different sub-cultures, as well as create a joint feeling of identity and organizational structure. (In many instances the tendency has been to bring in external management).

It is also important to be aware that a real merger is time consuming. The institutions must set aside sufficient time to discuss how to achieve common goals and visions as a real basis for the merger decision.

The financial planning and risk assessment must be robust and realistic, and the institution must take into account that the phase of reorganization requires financial flexibility, especially in the implementation phase.

For the success of the merger process, the institution must have a strong communication internally and externally. Communication and dialogue with stakeholders, especially staff and students, are essential throughout the process. Support will be developed and resistance reduced if there is a concerted effort to explain the vision and address fears. Expectations need to be managed and kept realistic (HEFCE 2012).

Furthermore, it is important to consider recruitment after a merger. To bring “new blood” into a system with large cultural conflicts and tension, improves the possibilities to create a new common identity. This contributes to dampening cultural conflicts and tensions in the new organization.

#### **What should the Ministry of Education and Research/the Government do?**

From the authorities’ point of view is it essential to be aware that the forthcoming reorganization of the Norwegian public higher education sector by no means is a money-saving effort for the Kingdom of Norway. If the visions and goals behind the reform are to be achieved, namely improved quality, robustness and efficiency, the authorities will have to secure a certain financial flexibility to ensure the availability of necessary resources into the merger processes. Merger costs are often underestimated, particularly in areas such as harmonizing pay and benefits structures, ICT-systems and administrative processes (e.g. Skodvin 1999; Goedegebuure 2011; HEFCE 2012).

Furthermore, the Ministry needs to have a clear vision and strategic objectives for the forthcoming merger processes. The Ministry and the Minister have to be aware that the quality aspect is more important than geographical dimension. It can also be added that excellent leadership and adequate planning is essential at government level.

Another important lesson learned by previous state initiated mergers draws attention to the danger of trying to accomplish multiple objectives in the same process, especially if increased economic and administrative efficiency are two of the objectives. To realize the goal of increased academic quality in core activities (education and research), one must start with the academic ambitions – and they have to be concrete (Ursin et al. 2010, p. 337-339).

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<sup>2</sup> Collaboration is two or more partners working together in a particular academic field, which may involve combining existing operations, pooling areas of expertise or creating something entirely new. This project focuses on institutional arrangements rather than relationships between groups of academics. Alliance is a more systemic form of collaboration between two or more partners, covering a wider range (but not all) of their operations, where the partners retain their separate identities.

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<sup>3</sup> The Database for Statistics on Higher Education (DBH) is a data warehouse which holds data on a broad range of topics in the sector of higher education and research in Norway. This includes data about students and PhD candidates, educational institutions, researchers' publication points, staff, finances, building area in square meters, and also the amount of stocks and shares held by higher educational institutions. The DBH is initiated by the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research and assigned to the NSD (Norwegian Social Science Data Services) in Bergen. It functions as an important steering and decision-making tool by providing quantitative parameters for the use of the Ministry and NOKUT, as well as the educational institutions in the sector.

<sup>4</sup> Aalesund University College (AaUC) has about 2000 students. The University College offers a wide range of study programmes in business management, engineering, health care, fisheries and maritime trade. Molde University College - Specialized University in Logistics has about 2500 students. In the field of logistics, it is offering education on bachelor's, master's and PhD-level., as well as bachelor's and master's programmes in economics and business administration, management, sports sciences, social sciences and health sciences.. Volda University College has about 4000 students, has four faculties that offer a variety of courses in their subject areas: Humanities and Education, Social Sciences and History, Art and Physical Education and Media and Journalism.