

Human Resource Implications of Mergers: Evidence from Lower-Level Employees at a South African University of Technology

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Abstract:

This study was prompted by the 2002 merger of Technikon Natal and M.L. Sultan Technikon, forming the Durban Institute of Technology, now known as the Durban University of Technology. It examined the impact of mergers on lower-level employee motivation and morale, focusing on their perceptions during the pre-merger, during the merger, and post-merger phases. Data were collected using a quantitative approach employing a cross-sectional survey design from lower-level employees at a South African University of Technology (n = 50). Cronbach's alpha coefficients, measure central tendency and dispersion, and exploratory factor analysis were used in analysing the data. The study found that the merger negatively affected lower-level employees' perceptions of the process during the post-merger phase, resulting in low staff morale. While some employees were less satisfied with the changes, others adapted more positively. Notably, motivation levels remained high among lower-level employees. However, communication from top management to these employees was minimal. The study recommends improving communication and training between lower-level employees, supervisors, and management, and emphasises the importance of involving lower-level staff early and throughout the higher education mergers.

Keywords:

Institutional Change, Uncertainty, University of Technology, Perceptions, Staff Morale, South African Government.

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Introduction

An organisation's social interests should align with the community's values, ethics, and environment. Employees, as integral members of both the company and community, are essential to sustaining its core activities. Responsible management emphasises fostering strong relationships with employees across the organisation. In times of lost confidence, corporate social responsibility (CSR) tools can restore trust between stakeholders. Hence, the future belongs to organisations that strategically leverage human capital, especially during mergers and acquisitions, where focusing on employees enhances post-merger integration (Dao & Kazuhiro, 2019).

In South Africa, the higher education landscape has undergone significant organisational restructuring, with the merging of several universities being a central component of this transformation. This strategic initiative aims to address systemic challenges within the sector, including financial sustainability, administrative inefficiencies, and the need for enhanced academic quality, as well as research output (Benmelech, Bergman & Kim, 2022; Ramolobe, Malatji & Mavuso, 2024). The merging process sought to create more robust and resilient institutions capable of delivering higher-quality education and fostering innovation, while also optimising resource allocation and administrative functions.

Policymakers have called on higher education institutions to respond more directly to the new demands of competitiveness of knowledge economies. The demands include instilling competitive logics in higher education policy and management of universities (Poutanen, 2023). The competitive logics were demonstrated by South Africa when universities merged post-apartheid. An earlier study by Daweti (2015) serves as the foundation for the current research, revealing that organisations often pursue mergers to enhance operational effectiveness and efficiency.

Although these benefits—such as increased production, market share, and shareholder value—are typically associated with the private sector, mergers have also occurred in the public sector, including higher education. Daweti (2015) affirms that South African higher education institutions have been part of a changing educational milieu. The changes have taken place against a backdrop of an educational revolution at a secondary and higher education level in the country. Since 1994, several higher education institutions have merged in South Africa, to foster integration of resources and shared capabilities.

Research Problem

This study examines the impact of mergers on lower-level employees at higher education institutions, using Durban University of Technology as a case study. While existing literature focuses on academic staff members, it overlooks these essential employees who support university operations. The research examines whether mergers affect lower-level employees and suggests management strategies for future mergers.

The Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET] (2024) report notes significant structural changes in South African higher education, including mergers aimed at improving efficiency and academic quality. Although beneficial, challenges remain in managing mergers to ensure institutional effectiveness, academic quality, and stakeholder satisfaction. According to DHET (2024), the following remain as issues in South Africa's higher education sector:

- Institutional Integration: Challenges in merging cultures, systems, and programs.
- Student and Staff Experience: Impact on experiences and changes in services.
- Academic and Research Output: Effects on program quality and research activities.
- Resource Allocation and Financial Sustainability: Influence on financial management and stability.

Much research has focused on the financial success of Merger and Acquisitions [M&A] (King et al., 2019:2). However, while organisations are aware of managing the merger process, specifically, some organisations overlook change as essential for a successful merger.

For the purposes of this article, the central theme is the impact of mergers on the experiences of lower-level staff, including changes in academic and support services (DHET, 2024). This focus highlights how institutional consolidation affects those directly involved in the academic environment. Understanding these effects is crucial for evaluating the overall success of the merger process.

Research Objectives and Questions

The following are the research objectives of the current study:

To establish the impact of mergers on lower-level employees, particularly in terms of motivation and staff morale, within a higher education institution.

To examine the perceptions and experiences of lower-level employees during the merger process, including the pre-merger, merger, and post-merger periods.

The following are the research questions of the current study:

1. What is the impact of mergers on lower-level employees, specifically regarding their motivation and staff morale, within a higher education institution?
2. How do lower-level employees perceive and experience the merger process during the pre-merger, merger, and post-merger periods?

Literature Review

Organisational mergers significantly impact human resources, particularly lower-level employees who often experience disruptions in morale, motivation, and communication. In the context of higher edu-

cation, these challenges are magnified by the complexities of academic institutions and the need for seamless integration. This literature re-view examines the human resource implications of mergers, focusing on lower-level employees' experiences during pre-merger, merger, and post-merger phases. It highlights key themes such as communication gaps, employee engagement, and adaptability within the South African higher education landscape. The theoretical framework under-pinning this study is the Systems Theory and it is discussed in the next section.

Theoretical Framework: Systems Theory

The transition from apartheid to a post-apartheid democracy in South Africa led to significant changes in all educational sectors, including higher education. In 2001, the South African Cabinet approved the National Plan for Higher Education, which aimed to restructure the system. The National Working Group recommended reducing higher education institutions from 36 to 21 through mergers and incorporations (Ministry of Education, 2001).

These mergers were part of broader national reforms to address the inequalities of apartheid, unlike in countries like Australia, where efficiency was the primary motivation (Arnolds et al., 2013). The merger process was politically driven, with a short consultation period and limited adherence to standard merger protocols. Systems theory, as described by Laszlo and Krippner (1998), provides a useful framework for understanding these mergers by considering higher education institutions as integrated systems with interconnected components such as staff, students, infrastructure, and institutional culture.

Historical Context of the South African Higher Education System

The merger plan approved by the South African government in 2002 must be viewed in the context of prolonged segregation and policy challenges faced by the post-1994 administration (Hall, 2015). Apartheid legislation resulted in a complex higher education system with varying governance structures. Some universities, like the University of Cape Town and the University of the Witwatersrand, had British-style autonomy for white students, while others, such as the University of Bophuthatswana and the University of Transkei, were directly controlled by the government.

The system also included vocational institutions and was divided by language, with Afrikaans and English medium institutions further complicating the landscape (Hall, 2015). Spatial segregation, enforced by laws like the Natives Land Act of 1913 and the Group Areas Act of 1950, profoundly shaped South Africa's higher education system. By the end of apartheid, the system was divided into three racially-defined administrations (for Whites, Coloureds, and Indians) and several ethnically-defined "homeland" administrations for Africans, leading to institutions such as Bophuthatswana, Venda, and Zululand.

Hall (2015) highlights that, in 2002, the South African government mandated the merger of 36 universities, technikons, and institutes into 23 institutions over three years, aiming to address the apartheid legacy. The restructuring resulted in three types of institutions: traditional universities, universities of technology (formerly technikons), and comprehensive universities offering both academic and vocational qualifications. Despite recommendations that no existing institution was fully suitable, twelve institutions remained largely unchanged. One merger was nearly complete, (Durban University of Technology, See Table 1) while ten others were phased over 2004 and 2005. The Council on Higher Education commissioned research on the governance implications of these mergers, involving visits to nine institutions and interviews with leadership, with the report published in August 2004.

Traditional Universities			
24 772	University of Cape Town	Unchanged	
10741	University of Fort Hare	Amalgamated with part of Rhodes University	
29 901	University of the Free State	Unchanged	
41 224	University of KwaZulu-Natal	University of Natal	January 2004 -
		University of Durban-Westville	
18 205	University of Limpopo	University of the North	January 2005 -
		Medical University of South Africa	
55 732	North-West University	Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education	January 2004 -
		University of the North-West	
57 114	University of Pretoria	Unchanged	
7 169	Rhodes University	Campus surrendered to Fort Hare	
27 344	University of Stellenbosch	Unchanged	
18 059	University of the Western Cape	Unchanged	
29 498	University of the Witwatersrand	Unchanged	
Comprehensive Universities			
48 315	University of Johannesburg	Rand Afrikaans University	January 2005 -
		Vista University Distance Education campus	
		Technikon Witwatersrand	
26 119	Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University	University of Port Elizabeth	January 2005 -
		Technikon Port Elizabeth	
293 437	University of South Africa	University of South Africa	January 2004 -
		Technikon SA	
		Vista University Distance	

		Education campus	
10 679	University of Venda	Unchanged	
26 734	Walter Sisulu University of Technology and Science	University of Transkei	January - 2005
		Border Technikon	
		Eastern Cape Technikon	
14 725	University of Zululand	Unchanged	
Universities of Technology			
32 167	Cape Peninsula University of Technology	Peninsula Technikon	January - 2005
		Cape Technikon	
12 583	Central University of Technology	Unchanged	
***25 184	Durban University of Technology	ML Sultan Technikon	2002
		Natal Technikon	
10 003	Mangosuthu University of Technology	Unchanged	
51 785	Tshwane University of Technology	Pretoria Technikon	January - 2004
		Technikon Northern Gauteng	
		North-West Technikon	
21 416	Vaal University of Technology	Unchanged	
982 936	Total undergraduate student headcount enrolment, 2011		

Table 1: The Restructuring of South African Higher Education

The Concept of a Merger in the Context of Institutions of Higher Learning

To understand mergers in higher education, it is crucial to define them and distinguish them from other strategic partnerships. Various terms, such as “amalgamation,” “unification,” and “consolidation,” are used to describe institutional unifications (Azziz et al., 2017). Eastman and Lang (2016) noted that while many terms are loosely applied, each term—such as “affiliation,” “federation,” and “consortium”—has distinct meanings, with “merger” being unique among them. A merger represents a strategic initiative aimed at achieving a competitive ad-vantage in the development of universities. It constitutes a form of

collaboration and synergy between institutions of higher learning (Kusnindar, Puspitasar, & Widiniarsih, 2023). The terms merger and acquisition are sometimes used interchangeably, but they have distinct meanings (Auhto, 2019:12).

Mergers in state higher education systems, as described by Azziz et al. (2017), can involve the absorption of multiple institutions while retaining some original identities. On an international stage, an example is the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE), where six universities merged into two, each preserving aspects of their original identities, such as sports teams (Snyder, 2022). These mergers go beyond financial consolidation, establishing unified governance structures with a single president, provost, and consolidated leadership team for each new institution.

Global Studies of Mergers in Higher Education

Curaj, Georghiou, Harper and Egron-Polak (2015) produced a comprehensive book analysing mergers and alliances in higher education across several European countries, addressing the economic, social, demographic, and technological challenges the sector faces. In response, both national agencies and individual institutions have sought to pool resources through collaborative agreements or university mergers. In 2016, Higher Education Dynamics published a series of articles on university mergers, focusing on Scandinavia, northern Norway, and post-merger impacts in Denmark (Sutela & Cai, 2016; Arbo & Bull, 2016; Aagaard, Hansen & Rasmussen 2016; Huisman, Soppe, Eide, Frolich, 2023). Ripoll Soler's (2017) doctoral thesis offers the most thorough academic analysis, highlighting the need for a general theory on university mergers to guide implementation and decision-making, rather than just focusing on individual case studies.

Further work by Romanenko (2018) examines Russian mergers from the student perspective, emphasising conflicts and concerns related to institutional quality and communication. Her later studies (Romanenko & Lisutkin, 2018; Romanenko & Froumin, 2020) explore issues like uncertainty and student identity loss. In recent years, research on mergers has grown globally, with scholars examining the effects of globalisation, capital transnationalisation, and the opportunities for higher education in new regions (Bor & Shargel, 2020; Pa-padimitriou & Johnes, 2019; Slade, Ribando, Fortner, & Walker, 2021).

The Argument for University Mergers

Pausits (2020) makes strong arguments for university mergers. University mergers have been a significant trend in higher education development for nearly four decades, as noted by Pausits (2020). These mergers are often driven by a variety of factors, including increasing competition among institutions, the need for better strategic positioning in a globalised education market, and the pursuit of

economies of scale. By consolidating resources, universities aim to reduce costs, streamline operations, and eliminate redundant programs or services, thus enhancing overall institutional efficiency.

Defragmentation, or the reduction of fragmentation within the higher education system, is another key motive behind mergers. This involves bringing together disparate institutions or faculties to foster greater collaboration, coherence, and synergy within the academic environment (Steigenberger & Mirc, 2020). Moreover, mergers are frequently seen as a way to improve governance and oversight, allowing institutions to exercise more effective control over their resources and operations (Pausits, 2020).

In many cases, systemic changes brought about by university mergers lead to broader institutional reforms, aligning universities more closely with national or regional higher education policies (Pausits, 2020). These changes may include a reorganisation of academic structures, curriculum reform, and the optimisation of research activities. Additionally, by merging, universities can enhance their visibility and competitiveness on the international stage, attracting more students, faculty, and research funding (Pausits, 2020).

While the advantages are often cited, the process of merging can also bring challenges, such as cultural integration between institutions, potential loss of institutional identity, and the complexity of managing large-scale organisational change (Pausits, 2020). Nonetheless, the trend of university mergers continues to shape the higher education landscape, with institutions increasingly seeking to adapt to the evolving demands of a knowledge-based economy (Pausits, 2020).

The Durban University of Technology Challenge

Despite the specifications of the Higher Education Act, there were ambiguities in interpretation and omissions of detail (Hall Symes & Luescher, 2004). The voluntary merger of M. L. Sultan and Natal Technikons had proved difficult, with legal challenges, industrial disputes and considerable negative publicity (Chetty 2010). In the long period of uncertainty prior to the conclusion of the formal period of pre-merger representations in December 2002, there had been a considerable degree of political positioning by the affected institutions.

Organisational and Human Resources Implications of the Mergers

The decision to consolidate or merge institutions is never easy, and the process is nearly always painful and costly" (Azziz et al, 2017: 5). As HEIs continue to face extraordinary financial and efficiency pressures, the environment for mergers is ripe (Seltzer, 2017). During periods of institutional change, such as mergers, human resources departments often face significant challenges, including employee anxiety, low morale, work errors, and loss of motivation (Schultz, 2010). Ramdhani and Nkoane (2010) emphasise that employee motivation is directly linked to performance and influences their sense of self-worth within the newly merged institution.

In South Africa, the merger process left thousands of university employees in uncertain and difficult situations, with concerns about job security, post eliminations, and the lack of autonomy in selecting merger partners. This externally imposed process heightened fears of job loss and uncertainty. Paul and Berry (2013) further argue that how employees adapt and respond to these changes directly impacts the organisation's performance in the short to medium term.

Inherently, merged institutions tout the positive aspects of a merger. Rarely discussed are the implications on the health of the organisational culture in the aftermath. There is a significant gap in the literature related to defining the influence leaders have on the success of a higher education consolidation, managing rapid amounts of change in a short time-period, and ultimately the impact on employee morale post-merger (Maison, 2018).

When leaders disregard or underestimate the potential influence that they have on the success of a higher education merger, their institutions will likely experience increased conflict (Azziz et al, 2017; Frolich, Elken & Eide, 2023). Maison (2018) highlights that, ensuring that the vision, objectives, and anticipated outcomes are agreed upon and communicated prior to the implementation is vital to the level of turbulence the organisation will feel during the process. Continuous communication is necessary to ease the stress, anxiety, and fear inherent when staff are trying to navigate a merger. Communication within the organisation is multi-directional. It is equally important for there to be communication from employees to leadership and leadership to employees. When the lines of communication are open, followers are exposed to the vision and are likely to feel a sense of connection to the organisation.

Methods and Data

This study employed a quantitative approach within a positivist paradigm, which Rahi (2017) associates with quantitative research, to thoroughly investigate the research phenomena. It explored the impact of mergers on the experiences of lower-level staff, focusing on changes in academic and support services, all through a positivist lens.

Using a quantitative design, this research investigates the impact of mergers on the experiences of lower-level staff, focusing on changes in academic and support services, all through a positivist lens of lower-level staff at a selected university of technology.

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), quantitative research focuses on exploring relationships between variables to test objective theories. These variables are generally measured using instruments, and the resulting data is analysed through statistical methods. This justifies the use of quantitative research for the current study. The first question aimed to assess the impact of mergers on lower-level employee motivation and morale at a selected university of technology. The second question sought to

explore employees' perceptions of the merger process across pre-merger, merger, and post-merger phases.

Di Matteo (2019:89) explains that qualitative research is interpretive and emergent, as personal interpretations are inevitable and techniques may need adjusting during the study. This method allows for the spontaneous development of key features and categories, helping researchers focus on critical issues using data collection tools.

Ahmadzai (2020:18) highlights the importance of considering time's impact on research. This study used a cross-sectional design, collecting data at a single point in time, unlike a longitudinal study, where data is gathered over an extended period (Mayer, 2015:62).

The research site for this study was the Steve Biko campus at the Durban University of Technology. This site was selected because the potential respondents were located at the Steve Biko campus. The other Durban University of Technology campuses were not part of this study. Shukla (2020) mentions that, population refers to the set or group of all the units on which the findings of the research are to be applied. For the purpose of this study, the population is 50 lower-level employees at a South African University of Technology

Purposive sampling was used to select lower-level employees at Durban University of Technology's Steve Biko campus, specifically those in Grades 14 and below in the Peromnes system. These positions included garden workers, plumbers, builders, and drivers, typically support staff with low education levels, mostly older and male. Many had worked for Technikon Natal and M.L. Sultan Technikon before the merger. From a population of 70 employees, a sample of 50 was selected, with the entire sample targeted for the study. Purposive sample is defined as a sampling technique in which participants in population are identified based on their relevance to study and are selected for their attributes (Eitkan Musa & Alkassim, 2016).

A questionnaire was developed based on research questions and literature, adapting instruments from Reddy (2007) and Chetty (2010) to study employee experiences in a merged institution. It included two sections: Section A for demographic data and Section B, with 24 Likert-scale statements, addressing five themes—leadership, job satisfaction, merger decisions, pay, and working conditions. As the study involved lower-level, Zulu-speaking employees, the questionnaire was translated into IsiZulu, verified by a language expert. A pilot test with 20 participants ensured the reliability of the final version in both IsiZulu and English.

Before data collection, permission was obtained from the participants' line supervisor, who hesitated initially but eventually approved. The researcher explained the study in both English and IsiZulu during a public forum, addressing concerns about the study's benefits. Due to participants' low education levels,

clear explanations and translations were provided, and rapport was built to ensure comfort. Most participants completed the questionnaire simultaneously, with assistance as needed, resulting in a high response rate. Absent employees filled out the questionnaire later. The study focused on transport, gardening, printing, and maintenance staff at Durban University of Technology's Steve Biko campus.

Ethical Considerations

It is essential to maintain research ethics throughout a study, particularly when human participants are involved and share personal information (Saunders et al., 2019:208). The primary objective of research ethics is to ensure that no harm comes to the participants. The following ethical principles were central to this study and were adhered to consistently.

Participants were treated with dignity and respect. They provided written consent to participate in the study and gave permission for their interviews to be recorded. They were fully informed about the purpose of the research and how their information would be used for academic purposes. Their perspectives were accurately represented. Participants were also made aware that they could withdraw from the study at any point without facing any negative repercussions.

Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed. Only the researcher had access to the raw data, and no personally identifiable information was disclosed in the final report (Wiles et al., 2019:418). To protect their identities, pseudonyms were used for all participants. Furthermore, all recordings and transcripts were destroyed after the research is submitted.

Results

The study investigates how higher education mergers affect lower-level employee motivation and morale. It focuses on staff perceptions of a merger at Durban University of Technology, using a quantitative methods. Demographic findings from the quantitative analysis will be discussed.

Demographics of the Respondents

Thirty-six percent of respondents were over 50 years old, while only 2% were under 25, with most aged between 25 and 50. The sample comprised 94% male, 77% African, and 23% Indian participants. Notably, 41% had over 20 years of service, with one individual having 40 years at the same institution, indicating long-term loyalty. Additionally, 95% were trade union members, reflecting the common practice among lower-level employees seeking better pay and working conditions. The demographic findings were consistent across the quantitative data. Table 2 shows the demographics of the study.

Variables	Category	Frequency	%
Gender	Female	3	6
	Male	47	94
Age ranges (years)	25	2	4
	25-35	15	30
	36- 50	15	30
	50	18	36
Previous institutions worked for	ML Sultan	29	58
	Technikon Natal	21	42
Length of service	<10 years	4	8
	> 10 years	25	50
	20 years	21	42

Table 2: Demographic information (N = 50)

A Critical Analysis of Results on Perceptions of Respondents Regarding the Merger Process

Decisions regarding the merger were critical for lower-level employees. Responses to whether the merger decision was favorable were varied. 41% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the merger was a bad idea, while 33% were undecided. Undecided responses likely indicate indifference toward the merger's impact. Evidence shows significant staff dissatisfaction with the merger (Chetty, 2010; Sattar & Cooke, 2010; Chalufu, 2002; Jansen, 2002). Employee perceptions and experiences highlighted their concerns. Notably, the use of outsourced workers increased post-merger, often for roles preferred by lower-level employees.

An Assessment of Perceptions Regarding Mergers and Staff Morale

Assessing the impact of mergers on lower-level staff morale, 80% of respondents felt that the use of external contractors post-merger negatively affected morale. This suggests that contractors were seen as a job threat, leading to negative views of the merger. Only 11% disagreed with this view, and 8% were undecided. Next, we will explore perceptions of top management during the merger process. Top management significantly influences the merger process. The merger between M.L. Sultan Technikon and Technikon Natal was notably difficult (Chetty, 2010; Chalufu, 2002; Jansen, 2002). As shown in Figure 6, 61% of respondents felt that top management, including the Vice Chancellor and Deputy Vice Chancellor, showed no interest in lower-level staff post-merger, suggesting a negative impact on staff morale. The role of supervisors will be discussed later.

An Evaluation of the Perceptions of Mergers and Top Management

In examining the statement "Top management has shown interest in lower-level staff post-merger," it refers to the Vice Chancellor and Deputy Vice Chancellor in a higher education institution. Over 61% of

respondents felt that top management did not show interest in lower-level employees after the merger. This suggests a perception that lower-level staff are not seen as central to the institution, which could negatively affect staff morale.

An Analysis of Perceptions of Mergers and Supervision During a Merger

Immediate supervisors play a key role in managing lower-level employees and can significantly impact job satisfaction and motivation, especially during mergers. While top management handles broader stakeholder relationships, supervisors manage day-to-day operations. Analysis of a recent study revealed mixed perceptions of supervision before and after a merger. Pre-merger, 36% felt they received good supervision, 30% did not, and 34% were undecided. Post-merger, 41% of respondents were neutral about supervision quality, likely due to fear of reprisals, with 30% noting improved supervision. Additionally, about half of respondents had supervisors from their previous institutions, which may have affected their perceptions.

Discussion

The current study findings are confirmed by previous studies. Academic approaches to university mergers, acquisitions, and dissolutions reveal two contrasting perspectives. In northern countries, scholars focus on understanding the dynamics of these processes through various theoretical lenses. Pritchard (1993) highlights the importance of consolidating power to prevent decision-making paralysis, while Harman and Harman (2008) view mergers as tools for gaining competitive advantage, potentially creating "world-class universities" (Aula & Tienari, 2011). Romanenko (2018) emphasises the "human factor," focusing on the role of students. Other scholars examine the impact of globalisation and capital transnationalisation (Bor & Shargel, 2020; Papadimitriou & Johnes, 2019; Slade et al., 2021). Ripoll Soler (2017) provides practical models for mergers, aiding in implementation.

Governance and Institutional Reform, Managing Change, Employee Morale, and Uncertainty Across Mergers

Pausits (2020) argues that mergers improve governance by streamlining operations and aligning university goals with national or regional policies. This aligns with the current study, where university mergers led to more cohesive structures and policy alignment. However, lower-level workers often feel disconnected from these changes, highlighting a gap between top-level governance improvements and the lived experiences of employees.

Azziz et al. (2017) highlight that mergers impact all employees, including lower-level workers, who often face job insecurity and changing work expectations. The current study echoes these findings, showing

how institutional restructuring increases anxiety and uncertainty, particularly for lower-level staff during transitional phases.

Ramdhani and Nkoane (2010) and Schultz (2010) emphasise that mergers can reduce employee morale. The current study confirms that lower-level workers experienced stress and lower morale both during and after mergers. Maison (2018) also noted that pre- and post-merger periods led to job uncertainty, which further affected worker morale.

Maison (2018) observed that pre-merger concerns about job security and responsibilities caused stress for lower-level workers. The current study confirms this, as pre-merger uncertainty negatively affected job satisfaction, driven by poor communication from leadership.

Concluding Remarks on the Discussion

In conclusion, university mergers, while enhancing governance and aligning institutional goals with broader policies, often fail to address the concerns of lower-level employees. The current study corroborates findings by Pausits (2020) and Azziz et al. (2017), showing that such transitions heighten anxiety, uncertainty, and job insecurity among staff, particularly at lower levels. Additionally, consistent with Ramdhani and Nkoane (2010), Schultz (2010), and Maison (2018), the study highlights the adverse effects of mergers on employee morale and job satisfaction, driven by insufficient communication and pre-merger uncertainties. These findings underscore the need for inclusive and transparent communication strategies during institutional restructuring to mitigate employee stress and foster a sense of stability.

Conclusion

Mergers bring significant changes not only to systems but also to employees, with lower-level staff often overlooked in the process. This research examined the impact on these employees during the pre-merger, merger, and post-merger phases in higher education.

Findings showed mixed reactions: while there was satisfaction with training, development, and improved conditions, dissatisfaction arose from pay disparities, low morale, and the use of external contractors. Anxiety and frustration, driven by unmet expectations, were common. However, improved motivation and inter-employee relations were positive outcomes. The study emphasises the need to include lower-level employees in all merger phases for a more successful integration.

This study offers important suggestions for both theory and practice in managing the human resource implications of mergers. Theoretically, it highlights the need to deepen the understanding of lower-level employees' experiences during organisational transitions, emphasising their role as critical contributors to successful integration. Future research should explore strategies for addressing pay disparities,

morale issues, and the emotional toll of mergers to develop more inclusive frameworks. Practically, the findings underscore the importance of involving lower-level employees throughout all merger phases, ensuring transparent communication and equitable treatment. Organisations should prioritise comprehensive training, professional development, and support mechanisms to alleviate anxiety and frustration. Additionally, fostering improved inter-employee relations and motivation through participative decision-making and inclusive policies can create a more cohesive and resilient workforce.

Authors

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