



NORWAY

University mergers are changing the higher education landscape

Jan Petter Myklebust 08 March 2019

Although mergers have reduced the number of higher education institutions in Norway from 33 in 2014 to 21 in 2018, a further reduction is expected over the next few years, a recent conference was told. The conference was attended by 189 top university leaders, politicians, ministry staff, university staff members and student representatives.

They met at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) last month to discuss the structural university reforms of 2014-18.

The title of the conference was “Bigger, stronger, better? Challenges in reaching the objectives in the structural reform” and delegates heard a **follow-up evaluation** (in Norwegian) of the effects upon NTNU, which had experienced the most extensive of these mergers, uniting four former higher education institutions into a single university with 42,000 students and 7,400 staff, the biggest in Norway.

The **NTNU merger**, decided by a ‘knife-edge’ decision splitting the board six to five, was described by rector Gunnar Bovim as being “on the right track”.

However, associate professors at NTNU Eli Smeplass and Arve Hjelseth offered their view in *Khrono* that “the victors are now writing the story of the structural reforms”.

“Formally dressed university top-leaders and advisors are now walking around patting their backs in uniform agreement that the correct choices have been made in spite of resistance and in spite of the challenges encountered,” they wrote.

“Almost all keynote speeches were by stakeholders who in one way or another have an interest in the reforms being a success – the critical voices from three to five years ago were not well represented,” they said.

What university?

Nina Sandberg, parliamentary spokesperson for the Labour Party, said: “The diversity in the higher education sector today is not as we [politicians] want it. The financial system and incentive structure are such that the institutions are becoming more similar to each other,

and we have to look into that.”

Marit Arnstad, a senior politician from the Centre Party and member of the education committee in parliament, which voted strongly against the mergers, said that her party is realistic and does not believe it will be possible to “put the toothpaste back into the tube”.

But, she said, “We politicians now have to discuss [in parliament] what Norwegian universities shall be: Shall all be broad-based institutions? Shall some be thematic universities? What are the relationships between excellence and broad-based institutions? Are we creating A- and B-class universities? And do we lose something when the university colleges disappear? There is a need in parliament to discuss these questions now because they have not been addressed before.”

The Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research and Education (NIFU), which produced the follow-up report* together with the Technopolis Group, said that NTNU is “on the right track”.

“Notably broader research approaches have made it easier to relate to the national and regional workforce,” the report said. “But the fusions also have led to increased centralisation of administrative support functions and decision-making structures, increased bureaucratisation and reduced flexibility,” the follow-up report said. “And the university and university-college cultures now imbedded in the organisations are making leadership tasks more challenging.”

The report further found that the majority of the staff members from the old NTNU are negative towards the fusion, saying that the ‘brand NTNU’ and the academic status have been weakened.

To the question: “Confident that the rectorate is leading the organisation in the right direction?”, only 20% of the ‘old NTNU’ staff answer fully agree or agree; while those from three other institutions merged into NTNU have 22%, 65% and 54% answering fully agree on this question.

Interestingly, only 7% of the ‘old NTNU’ staff surveyed say that the merger has improved their international relations, while this is reported by respectively 41%, 63% and 57% of those responding from the three merged university colleges.

Mergers are demanding

Professor Rune Nilsen, who is working chairman of the University of South-Eastern Norway, the 10th university in Norway, established in 2018, told *University World News*: “The reforms of the Norwegian university landscape over the past decade have played a fundamentally positive role in the development of the science-based university colleges, dismantling the old concepts of universities and helping to understand what a modern university concept is.”

Göran Melin of the Technopolis Group in Stockholm, who is one of the investigators behind the NIFU-Technopolis Group report, told *University World News*: “The NTNU merger appears very well prepared and well anchored among staff and students, in comparison with many other mergers. All mergers include some frustration and pressure for certain groups involved, and that has also been the case here.

“The evaluation points to some areas where further efforts are needed. If that is considered, the merger has strong potential to be a success within a few years.”

Agneta Bladh, former state secretary in the Swedish ministry of education in Stockholm, who was rector of Kalmar University when it was merged with Växjö University to become Linneaus University in 2010, was a keynote speaker at the conference.

She told *University World News*: “First, discussions have to take place before a merger and a joint vision of the future needs to be established. Second, when the merger has been decided and the new institution is established, the implementation period and the real work begins for the staff – both faculty staff and administrative staff. There is no quick fix.”

She said this period may take many, many years. “Both staff and leadership have to be aware of this. In order to raise quality, which normally is the main reason for mergers, for instance, the educational offer and the curricula have to be looked over. Teachers need to agree upon joint curricula in order to have as much competence as possible for each educational offer.”

She said it might also be necessary for teachers to work with new digital approaches as well as to sometimes teach in other places. “It does not work to argue that one’s own solution is the best one – collaboration must be the focus,” Bladh said.

* *Borlaug, SB; Tellmann, SM; Melin, G; Hovdhaugen, E; Vabø, A. “Is the NTNU on the right track? A follow- up evaluation of the merger. Part 2”, NIFU report; 2018:31 (In Norwegian).*

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