Conflicts Revealing Power, Politics, and Identities in a Finnish University Merger

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Abstract

This empirical study of a university merger in Finland explores the conflicts that emerged among academic staff and seeks to derive lessons for public sector reform in the contexts of public sector organizational change. The theoretical approach of our article focuses on experienced conflicts by drawing on studies of public management and deepens our understanding of managing mergers in higher education. The analysis reveals conflicts related to power, politics, and identity struggles among the staff of the merging organizations. Our findings show that stifling conflict is likely to create horizontal polarization that will find expression elsewhere and jeopardize a successful merger, which is the purpose of the change process. Managing staff expectations becomes an issue of public sector reform also from the perspective of increased expectations levied on universities in terms of local and national economic development and innovation.

Keywords: public sector reform, public policy, implementation, conflicts, universities

Tiivistelmä

Artikkelissa tarkastellaan julkisen sektorin organisaatiomuutoksiin liittyviä konflikteja suomalaisen yliopistofuusion kokeneen henkilöstön näkökulmasta. Nojaten julkisjohtamisen kirjallisuuteen konflikteista tämä artikkeli syventää ymmärrystä siitä, miten jännitteisessä organisaation muutostilanteessa eri osapuolet sanoittavat kokemuksiaan organisaatiomuutoksesta. Haastatteluaineiston analyysi paikantaa vallankäyttöön, politiikkaan ja identiteettikamppailuun liittyviä konflikteja. Tulokset antavat viitteitä siitä, että ylhäältä alaspäin johdetun muutosprosessin jännitteet voivat purkautua fuusioituvassa työyhteisössä horisontaalisesti. Tämä voi herättää negatiivisia tunteita fuusioituneen organisaation henkilöstössä, vaikuttaen myös organisaatiomuutoksen onnistumiseen. Keskeisten toimijoiden on hyvä olla tietoisia näistä konflikteista, niiden taustalla vaikuttavista dynamiikoista ja konfliktien mahdollisista purkautumismuodoista. Tämä koskee erityisesti Suomessa yleisiksi tulleita korkeakoulufuusioita etenkin, kun huomioidaan yliopistoihin ladatut odotukset paikallistason elinvoimaa ruokkivina toimijoina.

Asiasanat: reformit, julkinen sektori, implementointi, konfliktit, yliopistot

Introduction

In addition to research and teaching, the so-called third mission of universities expects engagement with local, regional, and national – often even international – social and economic activities, emphasizing the necessity of connecting with external stakeholders (Goldstein & Glaser 2012). Collaboration between academia, national and local governments and industry is represented as the core activity of modern, entrepreneurial universities fostering a knowledge-based economy (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff 2001; Etzkowitz 2008). The triple helix entwines public sector and private sector interests in developing local universities to produce synergies between these actors. Hansen et al. (2019, 563), for example, note how Finnish higher education reforms have sought to increase the societal impact – triple helix dimensions – of Finnish universities.

Consequently, universities are operating in local and national contexts characterized by political change affecting their operations and autonomy, thus triggering a need for change (Brøgger et al. 2023). Importantly, addressing these changing environments and policy demands through public sector reforms' institutional, policy and organizational changes significantly impact employee working conditions (Brown 2004; Knies et al. 2018). Especially during the organizational mergers in the public sector, vested interests of different stakeholders are in conflict, creating a need for balancing the contradictory demands of, for example, effectiveness, efficiency, and legality of different stakeholders (Jaspers & Steen 2019; Rossi & Tuurnas 2021). This article examines **what conflicts academic staff experienced during a merger process and what those conflicts inform about managing public sector reforms in the context of a public university merger**.

This study contributes to the literature of public management by investigating conflicts experienced by the staff in a Finnish university merger to gain understanding of how employees interpret organizational changes at the micro-level (Rossi et al. 2025). Second, the study explores power dynamics, politics, and contested identities underlying particularly public sector organizational change through experienced conflicts (Rossi 2019; 2021). Relevant to public sector reform implementation in general and particularly to universities undergoing mergers, we argue in favour of a more reflexive, conflict-considerate approach to public management and public policy implementation.

Foregrounding how Finnish academics make sense of a university merger as they implement the reform, we outline how a university merger became a setting for identity, power, and political struggles, illustrated through polarizing narratives of conflict experiences. Our empirical focus is on the merger of two higher education institutions in Tampere, Finland, and the conflict experiences of employees of the University of Tampere (UTA) and Tampere University of Technology (TUT). Drawing on open survey responses and interviews conducted in 2019, the first operational year of the newly merged Tampere University, we discuss the narratives of conflict experiences of university staff related to the merger process.

Experiences of Conflicts Revealing the Dynamics of Organizational Change

The study of conflicts has recently featured in public management literature, where scholars focusing particularly on public services' value creation and destruction processes have foregrounded the importance of conflict (Cui & Osborne 2022; Engen et al. 2021; Palumbo & Manesh 2021). Conflicts flow from differences in the institutional arrangements people's actions and decisions are dependent upon. As such, conflicts are an inseparable part of organizational life – a natural outcome of human interaction in complex organizational, institutional, and personal settings. Rossi and Tuurnas (2021, 157) described conflict as "an individual experience where the understanding of a situation or a phenomenon differs from that of others". People experience conflicts subjectively, and in the midst of conflict, their institutional arrangements – values, aims, assumptions, beliefs, attitudes, and practices – differ from those of others.

Rossi (2021, 50) argues that "Conflicts, arising from ongoing interaction and power differences, are integral to the dynamics of organizational life and organizational development". Nevertheless, addressing conflicts through an ongoing negotiation about the differences in institutional arrangements is needed for something novel to emerge (Mowles 2015). In this process of institutionalization, actors create, disrupt, and maintain institutional arrangements. Synthesizing contradictions of institutional arrangements offers alternative ways of understanding, acting, and decision-making (Rossi & Tuurnas 2021; Trischler & Charles 2019; Vargo et al. 2015). Conflicts, then, can become drivers for change.

However, rather than embracing conflict as an opportunity for change, public sector development initiatives such as university mergers are often subject to rigid top-down control. Under these circumstances, conflict is seen as a threat to development and something to be avoided, marginalized, or eliminated (Rossi 2021, 48, 168). The more controversial a development initiative is expected to be, the more readily managers seek to reduce the space for conflict within and outside the organization without addressing it. We argue that addressing experienced conflicts can reveal the stakeholders' different understandings of a given situation and therefore improve our understanding of the dynamics underlying organizational change (Boje et al. 2016; Vaara & Pedersen 2014).

First, as an underlying dynamic of organizational change, conflicts experienced by individuals or groups reflect who they are in relation to others and, therefore, reveal their own and others' identities. A merger qualifies as a situation where conflict experiences are clustered around ruptures in shared sense-making as stakeholders' identities are re-negotiated (Rossi 2021, 52; see also Boje et al. 2016; Vaara & Pedersen 2014). Ruptures prompt re-evaluations, and agency, circumstances, and consequences are interwoven with the rupture (Maitlis & Christianson 2014). Therefore, sidelining conflict also sidelines important identity work, problematizing organizational legitimacy (Suddaby & Greenwood 2005; Vellamo 2022).

To continue exploring the underlying dynamics of organizational change, conflict experiences reveal the struggles over power and politics, which, in turn, affect how organizational change is experienced (Vince 2014). Following Vince (2014), the definition of power refers to dynamics that are embodied in people's experiences and relations. In organizational settings, these power dynamics arise from the interplay between structures and agency thus informing, constraining, and shaping the ways of working. Therefore, conflict experiences are also "expressions of, and exercises in, power" (Colville et al. 2011, 8). As an underlying dynamic of organizational change, power relations are important because they inform, create and constrain organizational behaviour, structures, and action (Vince 2014). Important for our empirical focus on university mergers, power clashes are also inherently political; the merger process is perceived to have revealed a more or less political agenda by the merger parties – particularly that of an opposing academic tribe (Välimaa 1998).

Managing University Mergers as Ways of Reforming Higher Education

Following international trends, public university reorganizations through mergers are very common (see e.g. Harman & Harman 2008). Particularly in Finland, mergers have become a tool for structurally reforming higher education (Aarrevaara & Dobson 2016; Pinheiro et al. 2016; Välimaa et al. 2014). While previously relatively rare, there have been five university mergers in Finland between 2009 and 2021. The Universities Act of 2009 is often credited as a watershed moment, separating Finnish universities from the state but maintaining strong financial steering (Kekkonen 2010; Kohtamäki & Poutanen 2025; Kuusela et al. 2021). In effect, while the Act separated the universities from the public sector, they remained financially tied to the state and governed under public law. The Act also incentivized reorganizing universities for greater economic efficiency (Poutanen 2023). Accordingly, arguments in favour of mergers have emphasized the

perceived benefits from economies of scale and boosted competitiveness (Vellamo 2022, 36–38: see also Kohvakka et al. 2019). The same economic logic has also been applied locally – universities are expected to foster co-operation with local government, business and industry and offer opportunities for innovation with economic benefits. This is part and parcel of the so-called third mission of universities (Etzkowitz 2008), which embeds new stakeholders also within Finnish universities. Välimaa (2011, 109, 113) points to the increased presence of external board members on Finnish university boards as an expression of this development.

Branding and visibility serve as signalling to stakeholders, which has been particularly notable with the foundation university as a new kind of Finnish university in terms of competitiveness and prestige (Aula & Siltaoja 2021). Erkkilä and Piiroinen (2020) note that public rankings for regional and city-level innovation primarily draw on higher education, emphasizing the impact on local universities to the local but also national innovation ecosystems. To enable these synergies, universities have also developed new, more managerial types of organizational governance, which has correlated with a professionalization of university managers and the relative disempowerment of academic managers (Kallio et al. 2020; Kohtamäki & Poutanen 2025; Kuusela et al. 2021). As Välimaa (2022) has argued, new strategic and organizational priorities increasingly differ from staff expectations.

While Silvén (2023) has found a "managerial transition" across all Finnish universities in terms of changes to their administrative rules, Poutanen et al. (2022) argue that the organizational culture in Finnish foundation universities specifically has been shaped in favour of managerialism. Arguably, the foundation university has combined issues of identity with issues of power and politics: merger processes have sought to represent foundation universities as exceptional, locally significant and globally competitive institutions (in the case of Aalto University: Aspara et al. 2014; Aula & Siltaoja 2021; Aula & Tienari 2011) but have also reduced collegial self-governance (Poutanen et al. 2022). Given the top-down nature of Finnish university mergers, conflict avoidance may have become an unspoken managerial strategy. However, mergers are considered high-risk reorganizations in terms of organizational culture (Stensaker et al. 2016). Indeed, in recent research, particularly related to the Tampere University merger, the process has been referred to as a "forced voluntary merger" (Vellamo 2022, 35), with many internal stakeholders expressing serious doubts over the promised benefits (Poutanen 2023; Väliverronen et al. 2022).

Data and Method

The Tampere merger process that began in 2014 ultimately encompassed two universities with distinct profiles: the University of Tampere (UTA) and the Tampere University of Technology (TUT). The UTA was a larger multidisciplinary research university specializing in social sciences, and TUT a smaller technical university. The technical university not only had a specific identity but also adopted the foundation university administrative model in 2010 because that was seen as an efficient way to attract business cooperation, as had been the case with Aalto (Aula & Tienari 2011).

This clash of organizational identity and administrative politics became a fundamental point of contention: the disagreement over the administrative model led to increasingly bitter disputes during the merger process, with TUT threatening to discontinue the merger process in 2016 due to irreconcilable differences regarding particularly the administrative model (Poutanen et al. 2022). The merger was officially finalized when the new Tampere University began operations in 2019, but horizontal conflicts persisted in the new administrative bodies in the immediately following years. Crucially, the merger also introduced the City of Tampere as a powerful local stakeholder and one of the core founding members of the new university foundation for the new Tampere University, "coordinating" other founders together with Technology Industries Finland – a lobbying organization for Finnish export-oriented technology industry and business (Kuusela et al. 2022).

Local public government had entered the foundation university more directly than before1.

In this article we focus on how the merger process was perceived by academic staff. The empirical data consist of two qualitative sets: the first consisting of open responses from a survey conducted in 2019, and the second of interview data. Data collection was conducted in conjunction with an external research project, which also analysed the merger. The survey polled staff from the former UTA and TUT, and the overall response rate was 49 % (51 % and 48 % respectively). Nearly half of the survey respondents (47 %, n = 894; out of 1894 responses) answered the open question regarding their overall outlook on the merger2, which we draw on in our analysis of the respondents' personal experiences of the merger process. The open response was also conducive to qualitative analysis and thus comparable with interview data.

Drawing on the survey responses, respondents also identified as willing to be interviewed. The interview data comprising the second dataset were collected via semi-structured narrative interviews (Hyvärinen 2016). In practice, the interviews were conducted by a research assistant external to the research group. Questions focused on experiences of and responses to the merger and the respondents' attitude to participation and decision-making practices during it. The interviewees were selected from the pool of volunteers to equally represent research and teaching staff from both former universities and various career stages, but particularly to represent diverse views on the merger process based on the survey responses – in favour, against, and ambivalent – to adequately canvass the variety of experiences and points of view. The interview data consist of 53 interviews with research and teaching staff (18 professors and 35 teachers and researchers) conducted from late spring to early autumn of 2019, during the new Tampere University's first year of operation.

Both sets of data, the open survey responses and the interview data, reflect staff experiences immediately after the merger but focus on the merger process. Here, as the purpose of the survey data was to locate salient themes more generally and make it possible to focus in on them in the analysis of interview data, survey respondents are not marked with background identifiers as extensively as the interviewees: they are marked simply by an anonymized respondent number (e.g. #0123). Anonymized interviewee background information can be found in Table 1, and the faculty structure of the merged university in Table 2. Interviewees represented all faculties and both former organizations to avoid bias in the data. We designate interviewees by position (P = professor, T = teachers and researchers) and their former employer (UTA/TUT).

Table 1. Interviewee background information.

Professors	**Age bracket**	**Started work at UTA/ TUT**	**Faculty in 2019**
P1	55-59	UTA/2012	SOC
P2	45-49	UTA/2006	MAB
P3	40-44	UTA/2002	MAB
P4	40-44	UTA/2002	SOC
P5	50-54	TUT/2000	ITC
P6	45-49	TUT/2004	ENS
P7	50-54	TUT/1999	ENS
P8	35-39	TUT/2001	ENS
P9	40-44	UTA/2016	EDU
P10	65+	UTA/2001	SOC
P11	55-59	TUT/2014	ENS
P12	35-39	TUT/2018	ENS
P13	55-59	TUT/1990	BEN

Professors	**Age bracket**	**Started work at UTA/ TUT**	**Faculty in 2019**
P14	60-64	UTA/1989	EDU
P15	55-59	TUT/2000	BEN
P16	40-44	TUT/2007	ENS
P17	50-54	TUT/2002	MET
P18	55-59	UTA/1998	MAB
Researcher/teaching/ other	**Age bracket**	**Started work at UTA/ TUT**	**Faculty in 2019**
T1	45-49	UTA/1997	ITC
T2	30-34	UTA/2015	MET
T3	25-29	UTA/2013	EDU
T4	40-44	UTA/2006	ITC
T5	55-58	UTA/1990	EDU
T6	35-39	TUT/2006	BEN
T7	55-59	UTA/2009	SOC
T8	50-54	TUT/1991	MET
T9	45-49	TUT/1998	ENS
T10	45-49	UTA/1999	SOC
T11	40-44	UTA/2013	EDU
T12	45-49	TUT/2015	ITC
T13	50-54	TUT/1998	MET
T14	35-39	TUT/2018	BEN
T15	40-44	UTA/2006	MAB
T16	60-64	UTA/1982	EDU
T17	n/a	TUT/2003	EDU
T18	55-59	UTA/2016	MAB
T19	45-49	TUT/2017	MAB
T20	55-59	TUT/1993	BEN
T21	30-34	TUT/2014	ENS
T22	40-44	TUT/2010	ENS
T23	40-44	UTA/2010	SOC
T24	55-59	UTA/2012	ITC
T25	65+	TUT/1974	ENS
T26	30-34	UTA/2013	SOC
T27	55-59	UTA/2002	ITC
T28	40-44	TUT/2001	ITC
T29	45-49	TUT/2004	ITC
T30	50-54	TUT/1997	ENS
T31	60-64	UTA/1999	EDU
T32	25-29	UTA/2017	MAB
T33	50-54	UTA/1994	SOC
T34	60-64	UTA/-	MAB
T35	50-54	UTA/1997	ITC

Table 2. Faculty structure of the merged university.

Faculty	**Contains (previous university)**
Built Environment (BEN)	Architecture (TUT) Civil engineering (TUT)
Education and Culture (EDU)	Education sciences (UTA) Teacher training school (UTA) Language centre (UTA & TUT)
Engineering and Natural Sciences (ENS)	Automation technology and mechanical engineering (TUT) Physics (TUT) Materials science and environmental engineering (TUT)
Information Technology and Communication Sciences (ITC)	Communication sciences (UTA) Computing sciences (UTA & TUT) Electrical engineering, Language studies (UTA)
Management and Business (MAB)	Administrative studies (UTA) Business studies (UTA) Industrial engineering and management (TUT) Information and Knowledge Management (TUT) Politics (UTA)
Faculty of Medicine and Health Technology (MET)	
Social Sciences (SOC)	Health sciences (UTA & TUT) History, philosophy, and literary Studies (UTA) Social research (UTA) Welfare sciences (UTA)

The analysis proceeded through theory-guided content analysis (Krippendorff 2019), which enabled the location of conflict narratives in the survey and interview data (see also: Elo & Kyngäs 2008). Conflict narratives arose from the data in open coding when reading the responses in full. These more particular themes were identified through further qualitative analysis of what were identified as conflict narratives in survey responses and interviews. Different forms of agency, circumstances, and consequences emerged (Maitlis & Christianson 2014). We were sensitive to the fact that regardless of the administrative, organizational, or service system level where conflict manifests, all conflicts are always experienced subjectively (Rossi 2019), and, as Cañibano (2019) argues, understanding employees' experiences is essential to creating a more holistic view of the dynamics and complexities of organizational change.

When analysing the data, we focused on how the respondents narrated their conflict experiences. Disruptive experiences such as conflicts particularly warrant interpretation (Hyvärinen 2016), and these narratives provide a way to "organize and make sense of our experiences and evaluate our actions and intentions" (Cunliffe & Coupland 2011, 66). The narrative approach utilized in the analysis allows us to capture different aspects of the organizational change process (Herman 2009). When the interviewees described their conflict experiences, they sought explanations for their own and others' actions, behaviour, and decisions. Accordingly, analysing conflict narratives becomes an "interplay of competing narratives, when organizational members have different and conflicting stories to tell about the same event, and as actors deal with those competing narratives in different ways" (Cunliffe & Coupland 2011, 67). The next section reports the results of the analysis, focusing on experiences of conflict, and is structured thematically to reflect struggles over identities, power, and politics.

Results

To give an overall idea of the attitudes of the respondents towards the merger, in the open survey responses 12.8 % (n = 114) of respondents expressed a positive attitude to the merger, whereas 62.2 % (n = 556) expressed a negative attitude. A quarter of the respondents (25 %, n = 224) expressed no discernible attitude toward the merger. While it is to be expected that merger processes create antagonism and even negative perceptions of their merger partner, a closer reading reveals different emphases of conflict experiences. We will discuss this in detail shortly.

To contextualize the conflict in this particular case, however, it should also be noted that some respondents saw the conflicts experienced in the merger process also reflected in the survey questions: 6.5 % (n = 58) of respondents reacted negatively to the survey and made accusations of bias (compared to 5.1 % (n = 46) of open responses expressing a positive attitude toward the survey – the majority did not comment on the survey format or questions). Perceiving bias in the survey seemed to reflect experienced conflict in the merger process:

> *"The way the questions were posed was, in my opinion, very leading. I had a strong sense that this survey tries to get specific results, which is scientifically extremely dubious. Furthermore, for example, assessing the experiences of members of different organizations as a whole is completely absurd… Under other circumstances, I would not have responded to the survey, but I wanted to add diversity to the respondent group."* (#0590/TUT)

This criticism – and the tensions and reflections involved in researching one's own university – has been discussed in earlier at-home ethnographic research by Poutanen, Tervasmäki and Harju (2021; see also Vellamo 2022). In other words, organization researchers might find themselves drawn into the conflict as participants.

Conflicts revealing threatened identities

Unsurprisingly, many interviewees reproduced conflict narratives between the two organizational identities in the merger process. One UTA respondent, for example, hypothesized that previous experience dealing with an unresponsive university management (under the foundation model) had undermined the culture of university democracy at TUT. Another respondent describing an organizational conflict felt that a new managerial culture had taken hold at the TUT and among its staff:

> *"The reason why so many TUT staff support a [administrative] model of strong, professional management and maybe even suck up to the current university management is that they also have a history of staff redundancies, in which people who were considered difficult were let go… That managerial culture has impressed an understanding that you follow top-down authority, or else."* (P4/UTA/SOC)

One TUT researcher went as far as to claim that "technical disciplines lacked education in democracy" (T14/TUT/BEN). The perceived less-collegial culture of university management at TUT was an integral dimension of the merger conflict for many UTA staff. Those informants who were committed to an identity that placed a high value on university democracy, and the merger crystallized a conflict over the fundamental self-governing character of the university.

The conflict narratives revealing threatened identities can be read as a displacement of dissatisfaction with the foundation university's managerial system, which TUT personnel had, more or less, already adjusted to. Many TUT respondents considered focusing on their own work as their top priority. Moreover, the merger was considered to potentially damage the brand of the technical disciplines in the eyes of their important stakeholders. That perception perhaps explains

why active resistance (e.g. demonstrations) during the merger process was not well received among TUT staff and was seen as politicizing the merger (Vellamo 2022).

The conflict narratives, especially on the part of TUT staff, focused less on managerial concerns and more on the clash of identities or operational cultures between different scientific disciplines as the primary driver of the conflict. There were, for example, concerns that the humanities and social sciences would benefit disproportionately from the technical disciplines more integrally linked with business and industry income streams.

> *"I do not like the merger because now the philosophers, sociologists, and other useless hippies of UTA are mooching on the capital of the foundation university (after failing with their own capitalization). In addition, any democratic decision-making will become extremely difficult, given how different the two universities are in terms of ideology. Nothing sensible can be decided upon, and even in the best case, all decisions will be watered-down compromises"* (#1424/TUT)

The respondent not only explained the differences between contested identities but also normatively evaluated those identities. As the larger of the two merged universities, the social science orientation of UTA was seen as a threat to the identity of the emphatically technical university (Vellamo 2022), suggesting the relevance of discipline-based academic tribes behind academic identities (Välimaa 1998).

Negative experiences expressed by UTA staff revolved around a hostile takeover by the centralized administrative culture at TUT, which also meant a reordering of organizational values to reflect business interests. One TUT professor commented that related to organizational culture, the *political* nature of UTA (a descriptor used pejoratively) made it an easy target in a conflict of identities (P11/TUT/ENS). Conversely, in other cases the conflict narratives also ideologically associated TUT identity with market principles in a similarly political interpretation:

> *"It is like TUT standing in for neoliberal, rather harsh financial policy, whereas UTA is… well, a counterpart to that thinking. (T14/TUT/BEN)"*

These conflict narratives were strongly embedded in their respective organizations: TUT respondents felt they had lost their organizational identity (and brand) after merging with an old-fashioned political institution like UTA:

> *"(--) I am irritated that the former TUT made many changes and efforts, including layoffs, to make the merger financially tenable, and UTA didn't do a thing. And yet, we will need to cut costs again, and we fear for our jobs again. The former UTA seems to worship titles and hierarchy. They pass top-down decisions on best practices simply because they're the bigger university. Many of these practices have been tried and rejected at TUT as obsolete and cumbersome. Most TUT staff have encountered UTA staff slandering their professionalism, myself included. I used to be positive about the merger, but now I feel TUT is nothing more than an unfortunate subsidiary." (#1587/TUT)*

In turn, UTA respondents, who reported experiencing hostile organizational bias in the reordering of the administrative structure of the university, focused on how the merger in their view followed the administrative model of the TUT. For them, this was also reflected in the new administration appointments that deconstructed their old university and its ways of working. Both sides of the merger simultaneously saw their identities threatened by the other.

Conflicts revealing struggles over power

While for TUT respondents perceptions of bias in the merger process were often related to identity, UTA respondents pointed to changes in the power dynamics of managerial practice and administrative structures:

> *"[TUT] has gained far too much power in the merger. The administration has been reformed in a way that reduces its basic capability… One cannot be happy with this forced marriage, but [university mergers] seem to be the trend now in Finland, still following the old wave of new public management."* (#0056/UTA)

Identity work may be a natural way for individuals to make sense of more structural changes in organizational power dynamics. For UTA respondents, in particular, the power struggles manifested as trauma: the lost sense of academic community due to the power imbalance between the merger partners.

> *"My experience of the [merger] has been one of shock. At times, I feel like the process has been traumatic to the entire community. So many things happened during the process that seem to have sought to destroy what was best at [UTA]." (#0122/UTA)*

> *"The new university doesn't feel like a community. The former TUT...is actively echoing the master's voice in shaping the practicalities of the new university. The well-established structures, practices, and work communities of the former UTA were dissolved, and our managers were transferred and replaced by TUT personnel." (#0173/UTA)*

Furthermore, some of the respondents' conflict narratives highlighted power struggles and imbalances. The experiences of those who held power in the merger process were often expressions of these power struggles, especially among respondents who identified with UTA.

> *"At the beginning, the merger seemed a good idea, opening new opportunities. However, the merger process and [power games], incompetence, lack of appreciation and mistrust in us took away all my willingness to commit to the new university. 'The old' UTA was the best university I have ever worked in, but it was basically occupied.* (#0233/UTA)"

> *"One's attitude to the merger is, to a great extent, dependent on where you are coming from and whose side you stand on. I have studied social science at UTA and worked at TUT for a long time. I believe I can understand both extremes. From [TUT], people are amazed that an apparently small group of [UTA] staff has hijacked the public discourse and made strong statements in the name of the entire university community."* (#1778/TUT)

Summing up, many UTA staff felt like their university had been taken over, and that the party with greater administrative power was dictating the new operational practice and supplanting the managerial strata of the new university: "I support the merger. I was, and still am, however, troubled by the overt influence of TUT management culture in the new university. It felt like a hostile takeover." (#0076/UTA) Furthermore, particularly many UTA respondents voiced concerns that external stakeholders participated in these power struggles when pushing the merger forward:

> *"The merger started with trying to reach a greater common good, but as the process neared the finish line, it changed and became dictated by Technology Industries Finland. There is acute fear that the valued and traditional multidisciplinary UTA will become little more than a research and development facility owned by Technology Industries Finland."* (#0744/UTA)

Conflicts becoming politicized

When looking at the conflict narratives that emphasized political motivations, the perceptions became increasingly polarised along normative lines. Respondents adopted positions that they ascribed as representative of their entire organization, as a quote from one TUT professor illustrates:

> *"From [a TUT perspective], it seems that UTA is traditionally politically tinged in a way that they think they can take taxpayer money and then decide what to do with it. Now, I don't think like that; I think we have to be accountable to society. We can't just sit with a glass of red wine and philosophize about random things. The research we [at TUT] do is very much related to industry and practical applications" (P11/TUT/ENS).*

As our findings illustrate, TUT staff saw the merger as threatening the identity of the technological university, juxtaposed in particular against the projected identity of social sciences at UTA, in addition to the outspoken interpretation of UTA being a political institution. Consequently, for TUT staff, the conflict inherent to the merger was at times perceived as a political struggle with a small vocal minority creating conflict for ideological reasons:

> *"The change requires a lot of work and can't be completed quickly. All members of the university community have to support the change. It is incomprehensible to me that a small but vocal minority is sabotaging the change, screwing over everyone, and, what's more, pretending to represent the university community without any basis in fact. What is such a person, willing to sabotage the building of their own community, thinking? You can leave the community if you don't like it and leave the others in peace to build a new community."* (#0664/TUT)

In this sense, the conflict was given a distinct political dimension, which also drew from Finnish political or historical conceptions of political conflict: "The preparatory phase [of the merger] was entirely wasted with [the two universities] digging in and building minefields for a rerun of 1918"3 (#0559/TUT). When opposition to some changes resulting from the merger was explained away as ideological, it did not seem to need any further explanation, as some were interpreted as promoting conflict as an end in itself. That was the implicit meaning behind the conflict narratives citing ideological or political motivations. The solution inferred from these responses was simple: stop resisting change (on illegitimate ideological grounds) because doing so was harming the reputation of the new university.

> *"What has irritated me the most is that the publicity [over the merger] has been dominated by communist whiners, who, through their journalist pals, are able to feed a completely distorted image of the whole process into the press and have represented themselves and their resistance to change as the opinion of the whole university community." (#0703/TUT)*

At times, UTA staff's resistance to the merger process appeared politically motivated to TUT staff, as was visible already when discussing identity conflicts previously. The term 'political' was used negatively to invoke actions that harmed the merger process and the new university as a whole. That was particularly evident when merger-process problems were aired in public, such as through disclosures to the media and social media posts ridiculing the merger process (Väliverronen et al. 2022).

> *"A small bunch of whiners has managed to completely distort the image [of the merger]. For many of them, their publishing track record is rather insignificant, barring a few former Marxists from the 1970s. Most of the university community has reacted [to the merger] in a neutral or positive way. This whole thing has reminded me of lefties making a ruckus at the*

university back in the day. The dubious reputation of [UTA] as a lefty-greeny institution has been once more confirmed." (#0903/UTA)

As can be seen from the previous quote, these opinions were not always strictly divided according to previous organizational background; the respondent added having become convinced of the benefits of the foundation university during the merger process.

Still, these responses seemed to indicate that any problems should be dealt with quietly in-house. For these staff members, it made sense to seek to marginalize the conflict and let the new university administration get on with running the university. One survey respondent even stated that one should either commit to the merger and the new university or "draw your own conclusions" (#0809/UTA), a euphemism for resigning.

Discussion

As public universities are reformed toward a more entrepreneurial orientation, which emphasizes triple helix activities (Etzkowitz 2008), they also go through structural changes, such as mergers. Based on our findings and given that the current higher education reforms in Finland serve a growing number of external stakeholders including local business and industry, it seems that the perspectives of internal stakeholders were somewhat neglected in the merger process. The conflicts inherent to organizational change may become marginalized for the sake of the perceived greater good of a successful organizational reform and its benefits. Universities as organizations are given precedence in consideration over universities as communities or academic institutions (Välimaa 2022).

With a focus on how the staff experienced conflicts during a university merger, our findings are clustered around conflicts revealing the dynamics underlying the organizational change as threatened identities, struggles over power, and the politicized aspects of conflicts. The analysed conflicts emphasized different aspects depending on the pre-merger organization. We found that staff members from both universities tended to engage in narrative dichotomies based on their previous organizational identity: TUT staff projected distrust toward UTA colleagues and their motivations, and vice versa. Previous research has shown that group thinking as an illustration of power dynamics in conflict is typical: organizational actors frame their narratives to present the in-group in a positive light and the out-group in a negative one (Rossi 2021, 55). In academia, this may reflect the existence of academic tribes behind identity work (Välimaa 1998).

More specifically, conflicting identities characterized the experiences of TUT staff, projecting the merger as a threat to the identity of the technological disciplines specifically, as also identified by Vellamo (2022). Indeed, identity work in the technical disciplines is slanted towards pragmatism, emphasizing solution orientation and applied research (e.g. Geschwind 2019). Our findings also show how conflict narratives about identity were wrapped around accusations of politicization. Positive previous experiences by TUT staff of the foundation university as a non-political administrative model came across in the results. Those respondents highlighting the non-political nature of the merger perceived it as a technical exercise that had to be completed and thus resented resistance they viewed as politically motivated.

Some conflict narratives hinted that resistance to change and related attitude problems only wasted valuable resources or served narrow self-interests. Vellamo (2022, 115–116) argued that at TUT, UTA was characterized by "a lack of unity, continuous discussions, aiming for academic democracy compounded by weak and decentralized leadership". Conversely, UTA staff saw the merger as a power struggle expressed through changing organizational culture. Statements from UTA staff tended to depict the merger as a hostile corporate takeover of their organization rather than a threat to a discipline-based identity.

From the perspective of academic staff, the managerial and administrative practices during the merger did little to mitigate conflict. On the contrary, as Väliverronen et al. (2022, 507) argue, the new organization sought to adopt an authoritative, single promotional voice, which "sharply contradicted the perceptions and expectations of the university community, which eroded the university's reputation and legitimacy". Barrier and Musselin (2016) have noted that a narrative intended to build organizational credibility and brand as a form of stakeholder communication can lead to the opposite if the heterogeneous plurality of voices engaged in identity work, triggered by a merger process, is treated as a marginal concern. Therefore, at least in part, the critique around the conflicts in the studied merger has been displaced by the critique of managerialist university governance, seeking other, more horizontal directions of voicing disappointment (Gabriel 2008).

However, conflicts can jolt members out of "cognitive and behavioural apathy" and generate novel ways of working and organizing (Rossi 2021, 169). The question then becomes whether or not a merger process contributes to this state – the less autonomy and self-determination are involved, the more a merger process can exacerbate experiences of disempowerment (Kallio et al. 2020). The powerful policy-level steering toward mergers as an organizational strategy means conflict might not result from local management practices but from a lack of opportunities and power to do things differently (Kohtamäki 2023). This was also reflected, according to Granqvist and Gustafsson (2015), in the Aalto University merger, where external stakeholders and actors that promoted the merger as a matter of policy rushed through the merger process purposefully to curtail the materialization of conflict. Indeed, as Poutanen et al. (2022) argue, the Tampere merger followed Aalto's top-down organization.

Reflecting the findings by Puusa & Kekäle (2015) regarding the emotive experience of university mergers, we argue that the meanings and interpretations assigned to conflicts and how the emotional reactions are articulated, particularly, carry organizational weight overall (Rossi 2021, 174). Here, we have conceptualized conflict as an unfolding emotive experience, and thus more than the *rational* public scene of conflict. Therefore, our contribution offers micro-level insights into the composition of how academics responded to the conflicts engendered by the merger in their own expectations and experiences, which also determine their perception of the merger's legitimacy.

We further conclude that conflicts are necessarily political in public institutions guided by public policy. Organizational researchers should unpack negative narratives around politically or ideologically motivated resistance or development initiatives to discern what politics or ideology mean in the context. Mergers, in particular, are occasions where multiple identities, spontaneously adopted, managerially imposed, or emulated from peers, co-exist and are drawn into conflict. Seeing how prevalent a policy tool university merger has become, their conflict dimensions should be more readily recognized and addressed.

Finally, we wish to address the role of external stakeholders in the merger and in the resulting conflicts experienced by the staff. The Tampere University merger was to create, in terms of numbers of students, the second-largest university in Finland. The city of Tampere was, as a founder, a direct stakeholder in the university merger, given the significance of a larger university to local competitiveness (cf. Erkkilä & Piiroinen 2020). In the data, two professors (P4/UTA/SOC; P17/TUT/MET) reflected on the increased influence of external stakeholders in the merger process, identifying three core actors: the Ministry of Education and Culture, Technology Industries Finland, and the City of Tampere. While the Ministry's influence has been laid out in previous research (Poutanen 2023), the latter two were also core founders of the new Tampere university foundation. While external stakeholders, even influential ones, cannot be expected to mitigate organizational conflicts from the outside, Kuusela et al. (2022, 183–184) note that the City of Tampere, with primarily Technology Industries Finland and the Tampere Chamber of Commerce, scuttled reforms proposed by the university community, which would have addressed some of the issues of conflict regarding the administrative rules of the new university. Local stakeholders,

then, can refuse to defuse organizational conflicts, if those proposals are seen as counter to their interests, contributing to vertical conflicts finding horizontal expression. The more external stakeholders public sector organizational reforms incur, the more research is needed into the intended or unintended consequences of their actions or inaction in conflicts.

Conclusions

This article has outlined the conflicts apparent in the merger of two higher education institutions to form Tampere University in Finland. It has specifically addressed how academic staff experience conflict to enhance the understanding of managing mergers. We drew on previous literature and a rich set of data to address three realms of conflict experiences related to the dynamics of organizational change: identities, power, and politics.

Overall, we found that while the experience of conflict was shared, each merged organization emphasized its own perspectives. Powerful identity projections created stark political and power differences between organizational members. We suggest that marginalizing conflict in centralized, top-down directed reforms is not only likely to increase conflict potential but fail to address dissatisfaction, leading to more horizontally directed conflict narratives and organizational polarization. This study illustrates how the associated conflicts are not detrimental but are assets that help understand public sector reforms and organizational change. Institutional asymmetries are not necessarily a reason for the failure of mergers, but they are significant contributors to moments of non-identification. Therefore, we propose reflexive managerial practice that engages with conflicts rather than downplays them. In this context, we exhort external stakeholders of public sector development initiatives to adopt such practices, if and when they choose to intervene in a conflicting merger process.

Statements and Declarations

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Endnotes

1 Notably the City of Tampere was not a founder in the earlier TUT Foundation.

2 The question in full, translated, was "Describe your thoughts and experiences of the change in your own words".

3 The reference to the Finnish civil war here can be considered relatively potent in terms of political conflict.