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It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all *going direct the other way*... From A Tale of Two Cities, by Charles Dickens

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper is about the people who work – or worked – in two French higher education institutions (HEIs) that became one institution. It examines the repercussions of institutional merger in relation to people’s working lives. In doing so it represents a neglected perspective on institutional merger in higher education: the human dimension, revealed and scrutinised at the micro level.

The notion of the university as workplace has leapt to prominence in recent years; its ‘legitimacy’ as a focus of concern, analysis and scrutiny is underpinned by a growing body of literature (academic and grey) that implicitly or explicitly recognises that a university is only as good as the workforce that ensures its continued functionality and development. The Wellbeing at Work initiative has taken a firm hold of much of the UK HE sector, and the last decade has also seen the publication of policy-related documents such as the Higher Education Funding Council for England’s (HEFCE) The higher education workforce in England – a framework for the future, (HEFCE, 2006) and The Higher Education Workforce Framework 2010 (HEFCE, 2010). Interest in higher education workforce issues is fast becoming a global phenomenon, demonstrated by, inter alia: a substantial report on academic careers and work lives commissioned by the USA-based Association for the Study of Higher Education (O’Meara et al., 2008); a diverse range of studies funded by the Australian Council for Educational Research (e.g. Coates et al., 2008); conferences at the University of Hiroshima in 2008 and in Berlin in 2012 to disseminate the results of the international project: The Changing Academic Profession (whose findings also fed into the 2010 HEFCE report cited above); and a conference, Academia as Workplace: Linking

Past, Present and Future, hosted in 2011 by the University of Oxford's Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning.

Yet even within this body of literature – valuable though it is - the focus is seldom on individuals' working lives 'up close'. We read of trends, and issues are examined from behind a wide-angled lens, but how these impact upon the day-to-day realities of what it means to be working in the higher education sector, within the specific work context that is determined by the culture, the environment, the dynamism of interpersonal relations, and the rules and regulations of a specific institution, too often slip below the investigatory range's radar. More particularly, as Cartwright and Cooper (1990) observe, such individuals-focused micro-level analyses are absent from most of the literature on institutional merger in the higher education sector.

This article is intended to make a small contribution towards filling that gap. Its main focus is not the politics that gave rise to the institutional merger, nor the rights or wrongs of the decision, nor the merger process itself; rather, it is the extent to which and the ways in which these features of the transition combined to touch the working lives of the people affected by it. Such was the focus of a small scale case study that I undertook of the merger's impact upon people's working lives, and this article outlines details of the study and some of its findings.

I begin by outlining briefly the background to the study, and then move on to consider what has already been written about institutional merger in HE, before detailing the research design that I applied. I then present some key, but preliminary, findings, which I discuss in the light of analyses of responses to change selected from the literature on academic working life, including my own identification of the 'relativity factor' as a key factor that explains disparity.

## **OUTLINE BACKGROUND AND CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION**

The study was an opportunistic undertaking. Arriving in a French city in early 2011, where I was to spend five months, split over two visits, as visiting professor, I learned of an impending institutional merger that was to occur: my host institution - a national educational research

institute, maintained by the French Ministry of Education - was to be integrated within a grande école; (grandes écoles are elite HEIs<sup>1</sup>). Having always wanted to research the effects on people involved of an educational institution in transition, I seized the initiative and sought – and was eventually granted – permission to research the integration process. My interest was principally in examining its impact on the attitudes and the working lives of the individuals affected by it: staff employed at both institutions, but focusing particularly on those employed at the smaller institution – the educational research institute.

I have been told by one member of the research institute's staff that, strictly speaking, neither 'merger' nor 'take over' is the right word to apply to this case because what actually occurred is that the national research institute was dissolved and a new version of it – a new institution - was established within the grande école; technically no merger occurred, even though most staff employed in the smaller institution retained their posts within the new institut that was formed within the grande école. For simplicity, however, I retain the term 'merger', or use the several French terms applied to this case by the participants themselves: *l'intégration*, *la fusion*, or *l'absorption*.

From all accounts the merger – which had been instigated by the French Ministry of Education - occurred fairly rapidly, with the first official announcement of it being made to the staff of the educational research institute, by its director, at a social event in July 2010. This was followed by a campaign to prevent its going ahead, including trade union action and a petition placed on the research institute's website, which had attracted a number of signatures from the international educational research community. The opposition campaign fell on deaf ears at the Ministry, and the research institute was formally dissolved in December 2010. The newly formed replacement institute, which was given a new name, became officially integrated within the grande école less than four months later.

## **THE IMPACT ON INDIVIDUALS OF INSTITUTIONAL MERGER IN HIGHER EDUCATION: WHAT WE ALREADY KNOW**

My purpose, as I have indicated, was to reveal and analyse how – to what extent and in what ways - institutional merger impacts upon individuals: on their attitudes, their emotions, and their ways of working. As I observe above, this ‘micro perspective’ appears to be surprisingly absent from much research in the field; indeed, Harman and Harman (2008) note that, despite the extensive literature base that has been built up, little of it relates to the human costs of merger, while Becker et al. (2004, p.154), more specifically, highlight the lack of attention paid ‘to the impact of [mergers] on the personal, emotional and career experiences of the staff who live through such processes’, adding that ‘little has been written ... on “the human side of mergers and acquisitions”’. Their own study is a notable exception.

Where examination of the ‘human side’ is attempted it is often done so through questionnaires (e.g. Hay & Fourie, 2002), which do not generate the rich, qualitative data that convey the nature of individuals’ hopes, fears, expectations and attitudes – and the bases of these – nor people’s unique experiences, in a form that illustrates the lived ‘reality’ of institutional merger to those most affected by it. Hay and Fourie’s study (2002), in fact, seems to have gathered data that, for the most part, reflect respondents’ general views on merger-related issues, rather than their subjective, experientially-based perspectives; participants were asked to indicate their degree of agreement with statements such as: ‘Merging and regional cooperation should be initiated by institutions themselves’ and ‘Institutions should have the freedom to choose their own merging partners’, in relation to which respondents were asked to indicate their degree of agreement.

The bulk of literature on institutional mergers in higher education incorporates consideration of hard facts and figures - what happened, when, why, how, and with what results - rather than impressions, viewpoints, attitudes and emotions; one of the most recently published, up-to-date, reports of European university mergers (Pruvot et al., 2015) represents such omission. Analyses of case studies of mergers feature frequently in the literature, and many texts add, or

focus predominantly on, lessons learned, sometimes culminating in guidelines – often presented as lists that could almost be used as checklists by those about to embark upon merger – on what to do and what to avoid in the process. I have no intention of making such issues the focus of my study. Like all merger cases, the one that I write of is unique in many ways and I am not sure how helpful it would be to try to extrapolate from it general principles that go beyond stating the obvious and yet would be informative to others contemplating merger. Moreover, as an outsider – not only in the sense that I do not belong to either of the institutions in question, but also because I am a foreigner – I fully accept that I can only hope to obtain snapshots of what happened. In the section below I outline the process of gathering those snapshots.

## **THE RESEARCH: PURPOSE AND DESIGN**

I designed a study that was directed towards addressing three inter-related research questions:

- What perceptions of the institutional merger are held by those employed at the two institutions?
- What are the effects on the working lives of these individuals of the integration process?
- How do individuals respond to these effects?

I chose one main ‘formal’ method of data collection: semi-structured, one-to-one interviews with a sample of what has unfortunately amounted to no more than 16 employees of both institutions - particularly those employed in the research institute. These data were augmented by the impressions I gained through extensive participant observation, carried out in an unsystematic, ad hoc manner as I came and went on a daily basis in my capacity as a visiting academic. I did not record such informally-gathered data – not least because, in order to satisfy an ethical code of research practice, to use it as a formal dataset would have required the consent of all individuals whose articulated perspectives I collected. Moreover, to have kept an audio recorder permanently visible and in record mode as I interacted with my French colleagues, or to

have constantly taken notes, would not only have been impractical, it would also have risked undermining my relationship-building within an institution where I was anxious to fit in as a guest and temporary colleague. My participant observation therefore served the purpose of yielding impressionistic supplementary data that provided a contextual background. This background, in turn, informed the questions put to my interviewees and elucidated their narratives, but I also draw upon it in this article, to better frame the snapshots that I present of how working life is affected and reshaped by significant institutional re-organisation. I seldom planned to locate myself at a venue or event that promised to be data-rich; I was insufficiently informed or influential within the host organisation to facilitate such an approach. Strategic self-placement was in any case probably unnecessary, since casual conversation and chit-chat that were directly or indirectly focused on the merger and its impact were ubiquitous throughout the research institute and impossible to avoid. Consistent with Cartwright and Cooper's (1990, p. 69) observation that a merger 'is both a phenomenological and significant life event', this was evidently a (working) life-changing event of highly significant proportions for those in the smaller of the two merged institutions.

My study was in any case always intended to be small scale, with no pretensions to present a comprehensive picture of what had occurred and how this affected participants; I had other work to occupy me whilst in France and this was an add-on to that: a study 'on the side', as it were, that was something of an indulgence for me. (Interestingly, Cartwright and Cooper (1990) report that (at least, at the time of their writing, at the end of the last century) such small scale, predominantly qualitative, studies that are narrow in focus represent the most common form of analyses of mergers – within and beyond the education sector.) My data were supplemented by minimal ad hoc documentary analysis, as was required only to provide elucidation of details such as key dates, degree and nature of support for or opposition to the proposed merger, and communications between individuals or groups. It is important to emphasise, too, that the interview-derived findings presented below are determined by what was

communicated to me in interviews, and in all cases the focus was on the immediate issue that my interviewees were facing: what impact on their working (and in some cases, personal) lives the merger was having or had had. I did not seek, and none of the interviewees presented, a more expansive perspective that, for example, reflected wider issues in French higher education policy. This correlates with evidence (Evans, 1998) that it is the day-to-day reality of how their working lives, and work-related attitudes such as morale, job satisfaction and motivation, are affected at the micro level that matter to people, rather than the more expansive consideration of the policy and political shifts and reforms that shape the contexts within which they work.

The interview sample was intended to be neither large nor representative of the staff group in its entirety. Indeed, due to problems with recruiting interviewees initially (described below) and the unanticipated length of time taken to secure permission to conduct the study from one of the two institutions' directors, far fewer individuals were interviewed than I had hoped. The sample comprised a range of staff categories: academics, higher education teachers (which those who categorised themselves as such distinguished from academics), administrators, and a small number of (mainly senior) academic staff who chose to describe themselves as administrators, but who were in fact academics whose portfolio included a temporary or permanent administrative role (e.g. head of a research centre). Several individuals were interviewed on two occasions: first, within weeks of the official date of the institutional merger, and, again, six months later, when the effects of any changes on the practicalities of day-to-day working had been felt. The timing of these two temporal phases was chosen on practical grounds: they coincided with my two visits to France.

I found myself with little choice but to adopt a sample selection process that was opportunistic and in some respects represents snowball sampling. Participation requests emailed to targeted potential interviewees yielded very few responses; I was unknown in either institution, apart from to a small group of personal contacts. These contacts willingly volunteered to be interviewed and referred me to other potential interviewees, and little by little, as I widened my

collegial network by encountering people at seminars and meetings, or through introductions, I was able to augment the sample. It seldom seemed to be reluctance to participate or unwillingness to communicate their views to a relative stranger that had underpinned the initial fairly poor response rate; it was simply that I, my study, and responding to my emails, were not considered priorities. When I returned to France in the Autumn of 2011, by then something of a slightly more familiar face, I achieved a rather better response rate to my requests for interviews than I had secured in the Spring.

Interviews lasted between 30 and 70 minutes, with an average length of an hour; most interviews shorter than 40 minutes had had to be curtailed in order to accommodate the interviewee's busy schedule. This occurred in only a small minority of cases; interviewees generally seemed perfectly willing to continue talking for as long as was required. All but three – one who is a native English speaker, and two who were extremely proficient English speakers – were interviewed in French. Interviews were audio-recorded (with participants' permission), and their content was translated into English by me at the transcription stage. The direction of conversation was guided very loosely, but not constrained, by a core schedule; unforeseen avenues were also explored in following up relevant issues that were raised. Table 1, below, presents details of the sample, but some of the categorisation lacks specificity in the interests of preserving anonymity (I do not, for example, distinguish between senior lecturers and professors where I believe that doing so risks compromising anonymity; rather, I use the generic label 'academic'). Pseudonyms are used throughout.

## **PRELIMINARY FINDINGS**

When I hit upon the idea of drawing the title of this article from Charles Dickens's classic novel set in eighteenth century Paris and London, in the shadow of the French revolution, I did not appreciate just how aptly my findings would be able to be summarised by some of the terms or phrases from the book's opening sentences. The state of flux, the turmoil and the uncertainty

| pseudonym & gender | employed immediately before the merger at ...   | role   | interviewed in Spring 2011 | interviewed in Autumn 2011 |
|--------------------|---|--|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Michel (m)         | research institute  | head of a research unit                            | ✓                          | ✓                          |
| Robert (m)         | research institute  | academic   | ✓                          | ✓                          |
| Stéphane (m)       | research institute  | academic   | ✓                          | ✓                          |
| Agnès (f)          | research institute  | academic   | ✓                          |                            |
| Bruno (m)          | research institute  | academic-related head of an administrative service | ✓                          |                            |
| Marie-France (f)   | research institute  | junior administrator                               | ✓                          | ✓                          |
| Thérèse (f)        | research institute (but had previously worked at <i>grande école</i> )  | academic; head of research team                    |                            | ✓                          |
| James (m)          | <i>grande école</i>   | academic-related service professional              |                            | ✓                          |
| Henri (m)          | research institute  | academic-related service professional              | ✓                          | ✓                          |
| Eric (m)           | research institute  | university teacher                                 | ✓                          |                            |
| Nicole (f)         | research institute  | academic; archivist                                |                            | ✓                          |
| Bernard (f)        | <i>grande école</i>   | section manager within the estates service         |                            | ✓                          |
| Alain (m)          | research institute  | academic   |                            | ✓                          |
| Jacques (m)        | <i>grande école</i> , but was then transferred to the research institute in order to direct it and lead its merger within the <i>grande école</i> | academic; institute director                       |                            | ✓                          |
| Isabelle (f)       | research institute  | academic   |                            | ✓                          |
| Pierre (m)         | research institute  | academic; head of an academic service unit         |                            | ✓                          |

Table 1: Details of the research sample

conveyed by the extract at the beginning of this article correspond with the emotional and attitudinal experiences – particularly the shifts from one state to another – reported by most of my interviewees. I therefore extend the Dickensian link to the next sections, which outline my findings in relation to: perceptions to the merger (both in principle and in relation to its implementation) and perceptions of how post-merger working life had been, and was expected or projected to be, affected.

## **The ‘age of wisdom’ or the ‘age of foolishness’? Perceptions of the merger**

As research has shown (Meek, 1988; Millett, 1976; Strydom, 1999), and as common sense would suggest, institutional mergers are most effective when they have the support of all participants. Yet this appears to be quite rare, with the relatively recent merger of the Victoria University of Manchester and the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST) in the UK being presented as a notable exception (Harman and Harman, 2008). Meek (1988, p. 347) makes the rather obvious point: ‘a degree of staff alienation is probably inevitable in every merger’. The French merger appears to be no exception; opposition to it was vociferous. At the time that the merger was all set to go ahead – January 2011 – when the national research institute was dissolved, but before the newly-named institute was created within the *grande école* (technically there was a period of almost four months when the old institut no longer existed but the new one had not yet been created) its corridor noticeboards were peppered with denunciation and protest notices from the union, and I heard reports of a meeting that had occurred a few months earlier, in which the institut personnel arrived, carrying placards that read: ‘Non, à la fusion!’, dressed in black to signify the mourning of their institution’s passing. Indeed, consistent with Marris’s (1974) contention that significant change in work contexts is akin to the kind of loss experienced through bereavement – and, more specifically, that mergers frequently prompt ‘the sense of loss experienced following the bereavement of a close friend or relative’ (Cartwright and Cooper, 1990, p. 71) - the mourning theme was to recur in the many ad hoc conversations that I snatched with people as we chatted over lunch at a seminar, or stood in the staff kitchen waiting for the microwave to bleep; ‘On est en deuil’ (‘we are in mourning’), I was told on more than one occasion.

In my research interviews, then, I had expected my question – posed to most interviewees: ‘Are you for or against the integration – or is it not that simple?’ to have unleashed a torrent of negativity accompanying people’s assertions that they were, in no uncertain terms, against it.

That did not happen; the terms used were often very uncertain. Almost unanimously, the immediate response was ‘It’s not that simple’, heralding what emerged as a general picture of ambivalence, with only a very small minority of interviewees representing unambiguous opposition. The majority viewpoint certainly incorporated opposition to the merger, but it was counterbalanced by an ‘on the other hand’ perspective. This was evidently a constituency of intelligent, reflective, education professionals who had carefully considered the rationale for their stance or their viewpoint and were able to articulate it eloquently and, for the most part, dispassionately. It did not represent a picture of wholesale opposition to change, born out of prejudice, reflecting self-interest. Such attitudes and emotions may, of course, have underpinned people’s thinking, but if they did I was not privy to them.

Opposition was ascribed to a variety of reasons. Several opposed the merger – at least in part - on ideological grounds: the focus of the institut’s research, they argued, and the ideological basis of its ‘mission’, as they saw it, were related to social justice and the need to fight inequality within the French educational system. The intégration within a grande école - an institution that epitomised the pinnacle of élitism - was therefore not merely ironic, it was considered most undesirable; as Bruno explained:

Fundamentally, it’s an institut that’s always worked for educational democratisation<sup>2</sup> – the research has been focused in that direction, the department has, the publications have ... and the fact that it’s going to be integrated within an elite grande école seems to me to be something of a paradox. (Bruno, interviewed in March 2011)

Consensus seemed to be that there was a risk of diluting or undermining the institut’s mission, and several interviewees were content to judge the merger’s potential and success on the basis of whether it hampered or facilitated this mission. Eric, for example, was evidently prepared to give the merger a chance if it paved the way for improvements to educational research in France and its impact on policy and practice:

I'm all for a project that means that, in France, there's an institution that's focused on education in a way that's effective. In a modest way, that's what interests me. So, I'm prepared to go into something without preconceptions...so, 'for' or 'against', that's not the issue. The issue is: will the plans that are in place allow us to ask all the essential questions that so far hadn't been addressed at the X [former research institute]: early childhood education...social inequality...the fight against educational failure...how to tackle social injustice...all those questions? If the merger will allow us to do that, then...why not? Certainly, we can suss out how the land lies with Y [the grande école]: it's used to dealing with the élite, that's its history, but that's no reason to be automatically mistrustful. We might have a little nagging thought at the back of our heads: why would an institution that's about élitism become more focused on social justice? But, for my part, I'm not going to mistrust it out of hand. (Eric, interviewed February 2011)

Eric's observation that the institut had in fact been underperforming in relation to its mission was echoed – without my prompting - by several interviewees, including Robert:

I'm very attached to the institut and its function. But we were aware that it had run its course, and needed a make-over. ...On the other hand, the institut had been founded in the 1960s, to support the democratisation policy and in particular the advent of the comprehensive school. This form of democratisation...all sorts of social problems were surfacing and we weren't tackling them...so, if you like, one sensed the end of the road for the institut, and a need to rethink. ...But the institut wasn't going to sort itself out on its own. So, if you like, I was in a...a very...er...peculiar position. I thought there were possibilities for a fresh start – first, a new start in terms of quality...we could introduce criteria...I mean, there were cases of people who'd been working for seventeen years on the same topic

and had published only three or four articles! ... Well, is a merger with the Y [grande école] a solution? (Robert, interviewed March 2011)

The issue of the quality of service provided by the institut, and, by extension, its reputation, was raised by several interviewees who, like Robert and Eric, seemed to accept that major change of some kind was inevitable. Some cautiously saw the merger as having the potential to offer a new start, but for many their caution was fuelled by doubts: doubts about whether the two institutional cultures (that of the institut and that of the grande école) were compatible – which gave rise to concerns that the institut’s culture would be or was being eroded away – and doubts that remedial action of any kind had come in time to save the institut. Nicole, for example, observed: “I think the culture that used to exist has been lost ... we’re struggling to work together.” Similarly, senior academic, Alain – who, rating his morale and job satisfaction at only ‘3 or 4’ out of 10, admitted to having applied for posts at other HEIs - said:

My fear is that the Y [the grande école] lacks the culture to understand the kind of research that we do here, and that it lacks the will to try and develop it.

Asked if these fears had been realised, he responded: ‘The jury’s still out’.

Whilst cautious optimism – representing a kind of qualified receptivity to the merger - may have been shared by several, an underlying issue that many interviewees raised was the change to the institut’s status that the merger implied: it would no longer serve as the French Ministry of Education’s instrument for undertaking research and scholarship that were aligned with government policy, and with this loss of status came loss of the special relationship with the Ministry that the institut had enjoyed. This was the basis of Nicole’s opposition:

I was against the merger from the outset, because it would mean losing the institut’s national identity...and it would mean losing the direct links with the Ministry [of Education], and the mission that characterised the institut...something

of that would be lost. That was our fear. It was a privileged relationship...it put us in a privileged position. (Nicole, interviewed November 2011)

Was the merger perceived, then, as the harbinger of or catalyst for an 'age of wisdom' or an 'age of foolishness' in French higher education, and specifically, in the history of these two institutions that occupied prime locations on its landscape? From the perspective of the institut staff, the answer to this question hung on one key issue: autonomy. It seems that when the idea of a fusion had been mooted, it had been presented as merely a rapprochement: a coming together. Here were two higher education institutions who for some five years had shared the same site, separated by a shared garden; it was a logical progression that they would now begin to work more closely together and develop a sort of symbiotic collaborative relationship. This had been accepted as a perfectly acceptable – a sensible, or even a wise (to retain the Dickensian language) – proposal.

But – as many institut people with a nose for intrigue and back room dealing had sniffed out – plans for a rapprochement soon escalated into an agenda for intégration. As Agnès, recalled:

The threat of fusion or synergy – that had been around for a few years – had been immediately interpreted by the members of the institut that the Y [grande école] wanted to eat them up - really, to devour them. ...In fact, the institut director at the time told us that Monsieur A [the director of the grande école] wanted to swallow us up...and everybody tried to defend themselves against that. (Agnès, interviewed February 2011)

Still – as the commentary and the interviewees' comments above suggest - the idea of a fusion did not provoke unqualified opposition, nor was it universally dismissed out of hand as foolish, since it offered the potential for a fresh start, provided that the merger did not compromise the institut's autonomy. As Bruno had remarked: 'For me, the degree to which I can accept or reject the whole project has been to do with the possibility of giving this future institut

autonomy’ – a sentiment that was shared by many, including Robert: ‘I had no problem with the idea [of the merger] in principle, if the institut was to remain autonomous within the Y [grande école]’. And indeed the plans on the table had originally been for an autonomous research institut within the grande école, as Pierre explained:

I was one of the architects of the fusion. I thought it was a very good idea. ...The person who put the idea into my head was Monsieur A [director of the grande école], who had said straight away that the fusion would be a good thing for *l'école*. And I believed it. I believed it for lots of reasons: firstly because the institut had a bad reputation for its research, yet at the same time there was a great need for educational research and teacher training in France. And I thought, ‘we could position this institut, with its own “ecosystem”, its teaching fellows, and its partnership with the Ministry, within the [grande] école’s tradition of excellence, have it as a training centre for the grande école’s students...it’s a very good idea’. I still think so, in theory. But now I have serious reservations about the implementation of the idea. (Pierre, interviewed November 2011)

The reasons for Pierre’s serious reservations (and which were the bases of his resignation from his post at the end of 2011) were tied up with the issue of autonomy, for by the Autumn of 2011 many people began to suspect that the plans laid on the table earlier on in the negotiations – and which had assured the institut’s autonomy – were no longer worth the paper they had been written on. The institut, it appeared, was fast losing its autonomy. Its recently appointed director (who, too, was eventually to tender his resignation and take up a new post overseas in the summer of 2012) – who had complained not only in his research interview with me, but also openly, to institut staff, that he had no real authority and that anyone who wished to undermine him or to overturn his decisions, simply had to present her or his case to the director of the grande école, who invariably supported the complainant - now discovered that the institut’s budget had been halved by the management of the grande école (within which it was now

administratively located). Many interpreted this as yet another sign that the institut would eventually disappear entirely, losing its name and separate identity. Robert remarked: ‘I’m inclined to think that Y [the institute] won’t survive into next year, and Jacques [the institut director] will let it die quietly’, while Nicole expressed similar fears:

I’m extremely pessimistic. I know it’s [the institut’s] going to disappear. ... There are signs: it seems that we’re not necessarily going to have an adequate budget...that will allow it to function as it should. And then, when it comes to the work that we do and the dissemination that we do, it seems that people outside are more interested in what we do than are people in the Y [grande école]. ... Perhaps that’s just the way the Y [grande école] works, but it’s not how it worked for us before. We’re being prevented from functioning as we need to. (Nicole, interviewed November 2011)

But how accurate was Nicole’s observation that the institut staff were being constrained – prevented from functioning as they needed to? In what ways did this merger impact upon people’s working lives, and to what extent, and in what ways, did it affect their attitudes?

### **The ‘epoch of incredulity’? Working life amid and beyond the merger**

When I carried out my first set of interviews in early 2011 the merger had not been fully effected; that phase of my research, which occurred during February and March, coincided with an interim stage of the integration process. Life within the grande école did not officially begin until April 2011 – though, in any case, even if it had been officially enacted in January 2011 when the institut had ceased to exist, the merger would still have been so recent an event at that time as to preclude meaningful evaluations of its impact on people’s working lives. By the second, follow-up stage of my research, however, which occurred in the last three months of 2011, my interviewees had already experienced enough (more than five months) of life under the new regime to be able to provide the sufficiently informed perspective that I needed in order to

address the second and third of my research questions: What are the effects of the integration process on the working lives of staff in both institutions? and How do individuals respond to these effects?

It was only in this second phase of my study that I was able to include in my sample of interviewees some – regrettably only two (James and Bernard) - individuals who had been employees of the grande école immediately before the merger occurred (post-merger, all interviewees were employees of the grande école). Another two interviewees (both academics) had, however, worked for both institutions (see Table 1): Thérèse, had worked at the grande école for four years before then transferring to the research institut, where she had worked for five years before the merger occurred, and Jacques had held a senior role at the grande école for over a decade before he was asked to lead the merger process and to take on the directorship of the institut.

I was very interested in the extent and nature of the impact of the merger on people's job satisfaction, morale and motivation: three concepts that I have examined in much detail in earlier studies (Evans, 1997a, b, 1998, 2000) and specifically in the context of higher education working life (Evans & Abbott, 1998)<sup>3</sup>. I had assumed – particularly in the light of the data gathered in phase 1 – that those most affected by the merger insofar as it had impacted on their working lives – would be the research institut staff. I expected the pre-merger grande école staff to have noticed few, if any, changes to their working lives.

This assumption was borne out by the data from an interview (conducted in English) with native English speaker, James, in November 2011. His working life at the grande école, he told me, had been so unaffected by the merger that he scarcely registered the fact that it had occurred.

Quite frankly, as the shark, rather than the...the minnow...it [news of the merger] didn't bother us. It didn't really register that much on the horizon. ....Y'know, there were one or two laughs about so-and-so, who'd moved from here over the garden<sup>4</sup> to become professeure des universités, only to be re-absorbed back to

whence she'd fled from! (laughs). But apart from that it wasn't...y'know – and quite frankly, if you're actually part of a research team or a teaching team within the Y [grande école]...er...the absorption – because it wasn't a merger, it was an absorption – er, the swallowing-up whole of the institut...er...just didn't register, because it did have no impact. The people who've had some impact on their working conditions since then are all the people who got moved...shunted...shoved...shoe-horned into the institut building. ...Er...but they're not research staff, and they're not teaching staff; they're admin, they're publication, they're computer maintenance guys – I mean, it's their second move in two years! ...I have a computer that's a bit temperamental, but they don't seem to be any less available than they used to be.

But not all of the original grande école staff were as unaffected as was James. Bernard, the head of a service unit, reported sweeping changes to his own working life, and to the lives of many of his colleagues. He spoke of the 'elation' that he had felt at hearing that a merger was to take place, but this delight, he said, had quickly deteriorated into quiet despair as he found himself coping with the stress at having to do twice as much work as previously, under more difficult conditions, for precisely the same salary and with precisely the same job status as before. Moreover, his frustration and unhappiness were evidently shared by a great many of his colleagues: 'It's a shared feeling – when I talk I'm not talking about just me personally, I'm talking about everyone' (Bernard, interviewed November 2011). He outlined the specific factors that he attributed to this deterioration:

I'm suffering from a lot of stress – really, a lot of stress. When the news of the merger was announced I was euphoric – I thought it would be really interesting. But the stress comes from having too much responsibility...and we've had to get used to working at a different site, and that's been tricky. ...They regrouped the services, so what's happened is that across the three sites [the grande école was

split into two sites, to which the merger with the institut added a third] they haven't put one person in charge of each, so I'm now having to cover three sites. But a lot of people get overlooked; say, if they're at a different site, and people just forget about them, so there's no communication with them and they get frustrated. Despite the value placed on the fusion – and people were in favour of it – they're now disheartened...optimism is giving way to pessimism. I'm finding that more and more; people are becoming more and more pessimistic, and it's upsetting them, and they're suffering. I don't know what *you've* found amongst people here, but I find that they're suffering greatly.

I asked Bernard to try to quantify, on a scale of between 0 and 10, his current combined morale, job satisfaction and motivation level. At the time when the merger was announced, he said, he would have said 8; now the figure had dropped to 5. The nature of his unhappiness seemed to stem from his experiences of what he described as a poorly organised integration process that had been inadequately thought through and was seriously undermining his attempts to function effectively. Staff had received no training to prepare for their changed – often expanded – roles, he said, and he bemoaned being hampered at every turn as he tried to do his job. According to him, the staff whom he managed as service head – three times as many as before the merger – identified with and wanted to work only at the site where each had been based pre-merger, so they refused his requests to deploy them elsewhere. He complained that the *grande école's* management was in a state of flux, with no one knowing who was responsible for what: 'there's still lots to do at the management level; the organograms still aren't sorted'. He summed up:

But people generally aren't happy. We're talking about health problems here...there are people who are very unhappy but who can't express themselves, and they can either let it make them ill, or they can take strike action, and there's a

lot of that...just to make themselves heard. ...There's too much suffering at the moment. (Bernard, interviewed November 2011)

But for all his reported stress and unhappiness, Bernard's morale, job satisfaction and motivation level was evidently higher than that of many of the institut staff. I was struck by the difference in perceptions of the merger between February/ March 2011, when I had conducted my first set of interviews, and the last three months of the year when I carried out the follow-up interviews. In phase one, the most commonly expressed sentiment was one of apprehension – even anxiety - about what the future held: what would change in people's working lives. The greatest frustration at that time – and the source of much anxiety – was, according to my interviewees, that people were being kept in the dark; this was, for the institut staff, an 'age of darkness'. Stéphane, recalled: 'In March we didn't know where we were going', while Michel was more specific: 'There were no figures...no one knew anything...we were kept in the dark. We were impotent, and that period wasn't good'. Then came an element of relief, I was told, when plans and proposed structures were finally communicated, so that people began to have at least some slightly clearer idea of what to expect: whom they would be working with, and where (for much relocation of offices had been announced).

By the end of the year, though, when I carried out the second set of interviews, the mood had apparently sobered. The overwhelming picture at this time was one of frustration, combined with disappointment, and any receptivity to the idea of the merger that had been evident earlier in the year had now given way to wide-scale resentment. Reality – that is, the daily lived reality of these people - was perceived to have deviated quite considerably from the vision implied by the promises and rhetoric bandied about earlier in the year. Between phases 1 and 2 of my research morale, motivation, and satisfaction were reported as having plummeted. I was told that many people had left, and many more were looking for new posts – including recent graduate and junior administrator, Marie-France, who was employed on an annual contract. She recalled a period in which concern over her future had affected her sleep; with responsibility for

administering contracts having shifted from the research institute to the grande école, long after the time of year when, in the last two years, her contract renewal had been assured, she still had no idea if she would be retained. ‘In one sense’, she told me, ‘I’d prefer it if they’d say, “No”, so at least I’d know; it’s the uncertainty that’s stressful – the not knowing’.

Amongst my research participants Marie-France’s problem was unique since the other interviewees were employed on permanent contracts – indeed, categorised in France as civil servants, academics enjoy job security until retirement. Nevertheless, with the sole exception of James, quoted above, every research participant recounted the merger’s negative impact on her/his working life. Disaffection and dissatisfaction were evidently derived from perceptions that working conditions or working environment had deteriorated. Nicole quantified the shift in her work-related attitudes:

In January or February, I would’ve given my morale and satisfaction perhaps 6 out of 10...now, it’s 2 or 3.

She explained the source of her dissatisfaction – and that of others:

There were some people who never imagined that they’d be leaving the institut so quickly, so there are examples of hopes that’ve been dashed. There were also those – particularly in the administrative services – who were worried about the role changes because they didn’t know where they’d be going...so relationships have become strained...and there’s been a lot of disappointment.

She expressed the same kind of frustrations that Bernard (quoted above) had articulated:

We’d be given an organogram, and then the next day it would’ve changed...people have left and haven’t been replaced. And it’s true that the intégration occurred rapidly, but there was time beforehand to have thought through some of these things and worked them out a bit better. But it’s not working.

Michel, too, had, in February 2011, estimated his overall satisfaction with his job at 8 out of 10, but by November he was quantifying it at only 3 or 4. He spoke candidly of his frustration with the organisational ineptitude that created unnecessary layers of bureaucracy that continually distracted him from his job:

For me, what's most annoying at the Y [the grande école] is that everything's...too complex. Everyone's on the same corridor, so if a problem comes up I take a piece of paper somewhere and then I'm sent from pillar to post, "Oh, it's not my job, you need to go to...blah, blah!" And then when you go the person isn't there – "Oh, he'll be here tomorrow", they say, "I can't deal with it; he's got to sign it".'

Echoing Michel's frustration – and highlighting similar issues to those identified by other interviewees – research group leader, Thérèse, described the integration's negative impact on her team (resonant of Bernard's account, she used the term 'la souffrance de travail'). No one knew whom to go to for specific services, she complained; it was unclear who held responsibility for what and several posts had been lost or merged: 'There was a lot of panic [immediately post-merger]. ... Lots of people left, and when you see lots of people leaving, it's not good'. She added: 'we don't feel valued'; 'we've got no visibility'.

Time and again, my interviewees recounted tale after tale of organisational inefficiency on a scale that is difficult to comprehend when one considers that this is a HEI that represents the pinnacle of excellence and quality. What particularly frustrated my interviewees was that apparently no such problems had occurred in the former research institut. There was repeated reference to the frequency with which organograms changed, and to the time wasted on being passed from one person to the next, trying to identify the best person to deal with the issue or problem in hand. I heard tales of people who had no work to do, and who sat all day long surfing the internet. I was told of people who had been contracted to undertake temporary work at the grande école and who still, over a year later, had not been paid and did not know who could

resolve their problem. I heard, too, of email messages sent to Monsieur A, the director general of the grande école, that remained unanswered, despite their apparently conveying important information, or requesting a meeting with him. Life in the post-merger grande école evidently represented a deterioration of working conditions and workplace environment that was difficult to bear for most of my research participants, whose evident desperation and despair are effectively conveyed by Thérèse's comment: 'I can't see a way out'. The merger was thus retrospectively perceived as what, amongst other things, could quite feasibly be described in Dickensian-speak as having set in motion, for these people, an 'epoch of incredulity', within which many seemed to be enduring a 'winter of despair'.

*Different priorities; different concerns: the 'relativity factor'*

Reflecting what I call the 'relativity factor' (Evans, 1998; Evans and Abbott, 1998), job-related attitudes – including morale, job satisfaction and motivation – vary from individual to individual, since responses to a common, shared, environment and set of circumstances reflect different priorities and concerns. Since this variation, in turn, represents, inter alia, individuals' different values, goals and agendas, it should not be surprising that the degree and source(s) of merger-related negativity and dissatisfaction varied amongst my research participants, for the reported shambolic organisational and administrative provision that was, for many, so frustrating a feature of post-merger working life only affected those whose activities it constrained or impeded. The impact of merger, it appears, is relative to individuals' work-related circumstances and situations; for academics such as Robert and Stéphane, who worked mainly from home on their research and set foot in the office only fleetingly and infrequently, seeking the right person to authorise this or that written request or order was much less of a priority than it was for those whose work revolved around administrative processes. So, while the picture presented above reflects the nature, intensity, and bases of most interviewees' reported perceptions, Robert and Stéphane encountered different frustrations.

For them, the merger impacted more indirectly than directly upon their working lives. Specifically, the impact on them was attributed to the appointment of Jacques as institut director and leader of the merger process, and whom they identified as an enemy of Robert. Railing against what he presented as the intellectual myopia and parochialism of the wider French academic community, and complaining about what he perceived as a national psyche and academic system that resents the achievements and progression of any one individual above the norm, in his interview Stéphane argued that the kind of administrative irrationality and petty jealousies that had repeatedly placed hurdles in his path to career progression since he became an academic had become more pronounced locally with Jacques' merger-related appointment. Jacques hated Robert, he complained, and tried to thwart him at every turn by, *inter alia*: withholding financial support for conference attendance, disbanding their research group, relocating their office space, removing their secretarial support, and discouraging their plans to organise seminars. As Robert's close colleague and research partner, Stéphane complained of suffering by association from the fallout of this alleged feud. He quantified his morale and job satisfaction level as 0 out of 10, admitting that his systemic-derived dissatisfaction predated the merger, but emphasising that, post-merger, with Jacques at the helm, his working environment had deteriorated. He claimed that several positive dimensions of his working life had been impoverished by the constant need to fight to retain them and to try to outwit Jacques by circumventing his attempts to undermine his and Robert's work. His focus fixed squarely on his research networks and activities outside the institution, he admitted to seeking 'a more collegial environment – in France or abroad'. Within two years of the merger he had secured such a transition.

## **DISCUSSION**

Notwithstanding the 'relativity factor' (Evans, 1998; Evans and Abbott, 1998) that explains a degree of variation within my sample, it is evident that my interviewees' responses to the merger

that so radically changed the working lives of so many of them are consistent with responses to merger identified in the literature – including, in particular, Harman’s (2002, p. 107) summary: ‘most institutional mergers ... inflict pain and anxiety’. My findings corroborate Millett’s observation (1976, p. 89): ‘our evidence suggests that faculty of a smaller institution absorbed in a larger institution find their new environment less congenial and less satisfying than the one they formerly knew. Only a few make a satisfactory transition’. Similarly, Meek’s (1988, p. 346) highlighting the potentially problematic issue of ‘fear and anxiety by staff members over job security and institutional governance, coupled with a feeling of loss in institutional identity’ resonates with the reported experiences and perceptions of many of my research participants. ‘[I]n all mergers’, he adds (Meek, 1988, p. 347) ‘there is a sense of loss of institutional identity’ – which was clearly a key issue for interviewee, Nicole, and a concern for several of her colleagues. Moreover, Walbaum and Scheffel’s (2013, p. 4) suggestion that ‘in most cases, academics still identify more strongly with their discipline rather than with their university as a whole. Thus, it is not surprising that anxiety and resistance in HE mergers often tends to be stronger among central support staff than among academic staff’, seems to tally with Stéphane’s rather distinct response to the merger, and with his apparently lesser degree of frustration with post-merger administrative service provision than was evident amongst those whose work more frequently depended upon it.

But, despite its limitations, if my study is to contribute anything to our understanding of people’s attitudes to their work, or of the under-researched ‘human dimension’ of mergers, then it must go beyond such broad-brush, general, commentaries and observations. It must contribute not only the ‘micro-level’, individual participant-focused perspective that is almost entirely absent from the literature - and that illustrates in rich detail the nature of the perceived impact of merger on an individual’s working life (including, where applicable, the intensity of what interviewee, Thérèse, called ‘la souffrance de travail’) - it must also shed light on the bases of and influences on this impact. It must try to explain why individuals respond as they do.

One potential explanation links change with identity. From their study of the impact of structural reforms (including mergers) on academic working life, Ylijoki and Ursin (2015) identify ‘two basic storylines: regressive and progressive’ (p. 190) that broadly categorise the narratives to emerge from their interviews with over 40 academics employed in Finnish HEIs; ‘In regressive storylines recent changes are perceived negatively as representing the deterioration of one’s work context and situation, and of one’s standing in academia. In progressive storylines, in contrast, changes are described positively: as representing improvement and progress’ (Ylijoki and Ursin, 2015, p. 190). More specifically, within the many regressive storylines that emerged from their research, Ylijoki and Ursin identify five different narratives, which they interpret as indicative of (changes to) individuals’ academic identities: ‘the narratives of resistance, loss, work overload, job insecurity and cynical bystander’ which all incorporate ‘descriptions of worries, disillusionments, fears or dissatisfaction of some kind’ (p. 190). Similarly, drawing upon the narratives articulated by twenty-one academics based at an Australian university, Churchman and King (2009) also use the lens of academic identity to analyse responses to dissonance between individuals’ values and perceptions of academia and academic work, and ‘corporate stories’ reflecting their university’s increasing managerialist policies and practices. Two ‘vignettes of academic life’ represent two dominant identities to emerge from their data: ‘academic hope’ and ‘academic loss and fear’.

The key point advanced in this literature is that people respond negatively to change that compromises or undermines their identities; when values reflected in the new or changed work environment are at odds with the individual’s long-held and cherished values - and which underpin her/his identity – the imposed change, it is argued, creates dissatisfaction and lowered morale. This represents credible reasoning, but whilst I do not question the validity of linking attitudes to work with identities, I am concerned by the tendency within the current discourse on academic working life to - often rather glibly - categorise as her/his identity any evidence of a person’s views, attitudes or role and responsibilities. I have argued elsewhere (Evans, 2015, p.

259) that identity ‘involves self -labelling and self-designation’ and ‘may be determined only by the identity holder, not by the beholder’:

we cannot take liberties in ascribing this or that identity to people, no matter what their roles or behaviour suggest; unless they communicate to us something of their selves, as they reflexively understand themselves in terms of their biographies ...

we run the risk of barking up the wrong tree (Evans, 2015, p. 259).

Since, in my study, I neither asked my research participants to describe or explain their identities - nor indeed used the word ‘identity’ in soliciting their views and perceptions - I cannot put words into their mouths retrospectively by now claiming that the information they shared with me about themselves and their responses to the merger reflects their identities.

Nevertheless, many of my interviewees’ accounts resonate with the ‘narratives’ or ‘vignettes’ identified above. Aligning with Churchman and King’s (2009) ‘vignette of academic loss and fear’, and with Ylijoki and Ursin’s (2015) ‘narrative of loss’, are the concerns of interviewee, Marie-France, who feared redundancy (and thus whose case also represents the ‘narrative of job insecurity’), and of Nicole, Robert, Alain and others who feared either that they would no longer be permitted to carry out their academic work (including research) in the way that they were used to, or that their institut would lose its autonomy and its identity. Though space restriction preclude my presenting anything other than snippets from them, the accounts of many – if not most – interviewees, including, in particular, Bernard, Pierre, Agnès, Nicole, Michel, Thérèse and Alain, were shot through with the kinds of sentiments that Ylijoki and Ursin (2015) associate with the ‘narrative of loss’. The precise nature of the loss in the French case study may have varied in the detail, but essentially it represented the loss of elements or features of working life or of ways of working that had been valued and that had been more satisfactory (and sometimes satisfying) than the lived reality of post-merger work. The ‘narrative of work overload’ (Ylijoki and Ursin, 2015) aptly describes the situation of Bernard, who reported having to do twice as much work as pre-merger, under more difficult conditions, for precisely the same

salary. The ‘narrative of cynical observer’ (Ylijoki and Ursin, 2015) may be perceived in the accounts of many interviewees – including Agnès, Jacques, Alain, Stéphane and Pierre – who identified hidden agendas within, and political power-brokering underpinning, the merger. Rather than stay and try and fight the system, they chose to resign or retire (all except Alain had left the institution within two years – and most within one year - of the merger). The remaining of Ylijoki and Ursin’s (2015) five regressive storyline narratives – the ‘narrative of resistance’ – was evident in abundance in the many accounts of initial and continued opposition to the merger and its implementation.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Elsewhere I have identified three attitudinal responses to change in the workplace: resentment, resignation or receptivity (Evans, 2000). This study has so far revealed evidence of a succession of all three on the part of the majority of my interviewees. In a spirit of receptivity that might, under the right circumstances and with the right organisational infrastructure and leadership and management, have given rise to a ‘spring of hope’ - to use another Dickensian term - an impending merger was entertained as an initiative with the potential for effecting a much-needed new beginning for what from all accounts was an ailing research institut. Once the fight to prevent the merger had been lost, resignation prevailed as people tried to make this ‘the best of times’ rather than ‘the worst of times’.

The majority of my research sample, from their own accounts, felt let down by the merger of their institution with another. They felt let down by the prevailing system and they felt let down at institutional management level; for promises and deals had been broken, I was told, and agreements reneged upon, and the organisational infrastructure that they inherited was perceived to be inadequate for the task of coping with the merging of two quite different institutions and the enlargement of capacity. And it is at this stage – the stage of having to cope with what have been presented to me as countless frustrations and examples of mismanagement and organisational

ineptitude – that resentment appears to have set in. Whether, in time, the sequence will recur, creating a shift back to resignation and, eventually, receptivity, remains to be seen. According to the literature on institutional mergers, research has revealed that it takes up to ten years to heal the wounds. If this is so, then for most of my interviewees and their colleagues, the ‘worst of times’ is perhaps yet to come.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Grandes écoles are described by Normand (2015, p. 173) as ‘comparable in status to the United Kingdom’s Oxbridge and Australia’s Group of Eight’. Entry into them is by competitive examination; they are distinct from universities - known in France as la faculté [abbreviated to la fac], into which right of entry is guaranteed to holders of the baccalaureate.

<sup>2</sup> References to ‘democratisation’, and ‘the democratisation process’, denote social justice-related education policies that were set in motion by the introduction of a comprehensive system of secondary education in France in 1974.

<sup>3</sup> See Evans 1998 for full conceptual analyses and stipulative definitions of the three concepts, and explanations of the relationship and distinction between them.

<sup>4</sup> The two institutions had for several years shared the same site, separated by a contemporary landscaped garden. References to ‘across the garden’ - and similar expressions - were frequently used to denote the neighbouring institution.

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