The role of neighbouring activities in changing teacher education

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Paper presented at the
Sociocultural perspectives on Teacher Education and Development conference
University of Oxford, 7 – 8 April 2008
Introduction

The problem

This story begins when officials at the Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture and two university principals announced a merger\(^1\) of the Iceland University of Education (IUE) and the larger University of Iceland (UI), and stated said that an important benefit was the *improvement* of teacher education. Why *improvement*? Why not *development*?

A wider set of aims for the improvement of university teaching and learning in both institutions was part of the bill presented to parliament but the assertion that the merger would lead to *improvement* of teacher education was perplexing. Proposals for major institutional change carry with them the promise of improvement – why did it seem so necessary to reiterate that the merger would not be supported if it did not *improve* teacher education? Has the rationale of improvement continued to be a theme in the merger process?

At the time that the merger was proposed, the IUE was consolidating its own activities after an earlier merger in 1998, when four education institutions were merged. It has been actively building up research capacity and has undertaken a major revision of its study programs. Three aspects of development will be considered in this paper; the strengthening of research from 1998 onwards, the development of the new curriculum at the IUE from 2004-2007 and the current merger process, which became a formal project about a year ago.

I will use development and change in activity systems to explore why the particular rationale of *improvement* for the merger seemed or seems to be so important to policymakers and to what extent the rationale has been reflected in the merger process. In studying the activity underlying the emergence of new objects and motives and the

\(^1\) The merger is to take place on 1\(^{st}\) July 2008.
consolidation of the activity, there is a need to do an historical analysis of previous phases of development as well as a present-day analysis. This requires an object-historical analysis, an analysis of tools used in the history of the activities (theories, models, artefacts) and an actual-empirical analysis. The scope of this paper however does not permit such a full analysis, though a brief historical analysis will be provided.

**Teacher education and academia**

In the last twenty years so there have been mergers of teacher education institutions with universities across the world, for example, in Canada, Sweden, Scotland and New Zealand. A variety of reasons has been put forth by governments and universities for these mergers, including the more rational use of resources and that ‘teacher training’ might benefit from being undertaken in a university environment (see for example, New Zealand Government, 2006, Soto, n.d.).

The role of a national university, as a curator and generator of knowledge, and as a change agent, is taken very seriously in a small country such as Iceland. Teacher education however, as Labaree (1998, 2003, 2005) has pointed out, has low status in academia. The same can also be said of educational research. This view seems to find an echo in the views of the UI Council in June 2006, when it was minuted that the “merger should not be at cross-purposes with the goal of strengthening the UI as a research university.” In the minds of UI there seemed to be a potential conflict between housing teacher education with ambitions of being a top research university.

The same minutes also suggest that “…that the merger should strengthen the education of teachers in the country, increase their subject knowledge and strengthen the work of some departments.”
The structure of the paper and its empirical base

The paper moves between context and theory. It begins with the briefest of histories of teacher education in Iceland and in particular the IUE. This is followed by a consideration of what change and development in activity systems might offer by way of analytical tools to tease out and understand the historical and contemporary developments. Some aspects of higher education in recent years in Iceland are then discussed followed by a look at mergers in general, mergers affecting teacher education and the management of mergers. The final section of the paper brings us back to the question with which I began; why was the rationale for improvement of teacher education so strong in the early stages of the merger process and to what extent is it reflected in the actions taken following the decision?

In this paper I draw on my own experiences as a researcher and teacher at the IUE over the last ten years, as elected teacher representative on the university council over the last three years and from a variety of committee work both within and external to the IUE. The texts of selected written documents in the policy areas of education and teacher education from the mid 1990s and onwards have been read in order to understand better the deliberative activities which preceded and/or accompanied their publication. A website about the merger provides access to a range of official documents and presentations used in the management of the merger. Some survey data from staff about the merger process are available. E-interviews with IUE teachers and students from the subject areas of science and Icelandic about teacher education are being taken this spring to analyse ideas about the central activity of teacher education more closely.

2 http://sameining.khi.is/
Teacher education in Iceland

The institutional base for teacher training

Formal teacher education in Iceland celebrates its 100th anniversary this year (see Appendix 1 for more details). In 1908 a teacher training college for elementary school teachers was established in Reykjavik following a new law on the training of teachers. To begin with the training involved a three year course at secondary school level and up until the Second World War many of the trainees were men over the age of 20. The course of study was lengthened to four years in 1944, but the ratio of time spent on different courses didn’t change (Macdonald & Kristinsdóttir, 2003). The war itself brought major social, economic and cultural change to Iceland and a series of laws on education were passed in 1946 and 1947. By 1960 the schools in the country were overflowing and the majority of trainee students were women under the age of 20 (Kristinsdóttir & Macdonald, 2003, Macdonald & Kristinsdóttir, 2003).

In 1962 the training college moved into a new building, which still forms the administrative core of the current facilities, and into a period of turmoil as post-war demand for secondary education exceeded provision. The training college was considered a feasible route for those who didn’t make it into the gymnasiums but wanted a secondary education. Students were taught in shifts, in cramped conditions. Elsewhere the problems of secondary education were being addressed, albeit slowly at first (Jóhannsdóttir, G., 2002).

A Department of Educational Studies (DES) was established at the University of Iceland in 1951. Change was in the air by the 1960s and by 1971 the status of the college was upgraded to that of a university and the course of study was upgraded to a three university degree (B.Ed.). The process of upgrading from 1963-1978 has been researched by Gyða Jóhannsdóttir (2002) who analysed the process from three different perspectives in her doctoral research. The upgrading was not without its opponents in parliament and
some felt that the upgrading was unnecessary. In the late 1970s a bill was prepared on moving the education department at UI to the College but the step was not taken, not least because of vocal opposition from faculty at the UI (Jóhannsdóttir, G., 2006, Jónasson, 2004).

Upgrading of education and mergers were very much on the higher education agenda in Iceland in the 1980s and 1990s, with the emergence of new universities, upgrading of existing institutions and the spectre of “private” higher education. In the early 1990s the newly established University of Akureyri initiated a teacher education program. In 1998 secondary colleges providing training for nursery school teachers, sports teachers and social pedagogues and the University College for compulsory school teachers were merged. Training for all these professions was then at university level and the new organisation became the Iceland University of Education\textsuperscript{3}. It is the IUE which will now be merged with UI.

What is important for the analysis in this paper is that tenured teacher educators at the University College have had a research responsibility as part of their academic duties from the 1970s onwards and that considerable attention was paid to the building up of research capacity in the 1990s and especially after the merger of 1998. Although the proportion of staff with a doctoral degree is lower in the IUE than in the UI all have the same obligation and right to carry out research. IUE researchers and research students are increasingly visible in academic life in Iceland and successful in the competitive national research arena.

\textsuperscript{3} It should be noted that in Icelandic the name of the University College (Kennaraháskóli Íslands) became the name of the merged institution. The English name however changed.
The teacher education curriculum

We turn now to the curriculum. In 1988 a law was passed extending teacher education at the University College from three to four years. A few days before the new curriculum was to take effect in 1991, the program was postponed and eventually in 1994, parliament rescinded the law. One explanation given was that funds were needed to establish the teacher education program at the University of Akureyri, thus meeting demands for rural development. This demand was also met by the University College through the establishment of a distance learning program in 1993 (Jóhannsdóttir, Th. & Skjelmo, 2004).

The study programs at present are still strongly characterised by the professional needs of the groups trained by the schools which merged in 1998 but a major overhaul of the full curriculum was initiated in 2004, guided by a common ideology, and is still underway. One key element in the revision was the establishment of a five year course of study for pre-school and compulsory school teachers, leading to a master’s degree. A bill on this being a requirement for teacher certification is being discussed in parliament at present in an atmosphere where several stakeholders, such as the association of local authorities, have expressed reservations about the need for five years of study, especially in the case of pre-school teachers.

Part of the debate about the curriculum for teachers has arisen from the performance of Icelandic learners in international comparative studies such as TIMSS and PISA. A neighbouring country which has been visited by professional groups concerned with research, education and teacher education is Finland. Finnish successes in research and other OECD league tables is often attributed to the system of teacher education, in which teachers have been required to have a master’s degree, involving five years of study, since 1978. Indeed the IUE rector and the two deans laid the basis of the present curriculum
structure at their so-called “Arlanda summit” while on a stop-over on their way to a Nordic conference on teacher education in Finland.

Another ongoing topic for debate in teacher education is the amount or proportion of time to be spent on subject-based knowledge in the teacher curriculum in the basic course of study and in the longer course of study. At present 80 ECTS of 180 ECTS are subject-related in the three-year B.Ed. with students choosing one area of specialisation of at least 60 ECTS. Opinions are divided on this within the IUE, among existing and newly trained teachers, among school leaders employing new teachers and among other stakeholders in education. There is little consensus on whether it is enough, too little or too much. Views on necessary, sufficient or useful knowledge give rise to contests for student time and other resources and are based on very different views on the role of “teacher education”.

**Activity theory and developmental change**

I now introduce the concepts of central, object and neighbouring activities as introduced by Engeström (1987) (Figure 1). The analytical approach as presented by Engeström requires a description and analysis of the central activity (both research and teaching), the object-activity, the culturally more advanced central activity and the quaternary contradictions arising from the neighbouring activities.

![Central and neighbouring activities](image-url)
The central activity and the place of research

A preliminary analysis of the central activity (CA) with regard to the conduct of research at the IUE university was carried out in 2003 (Macdonald, 2004a) by considering primary contradictions with regard to the division of labour (the nature teaching vs. the nature of research), the rules regarding salary and promotion (short-term vs. long-term gains) and the tools being used in research (how technology might facilitate or constrain professional development, data gathering or literature reviews). Academic (tenured) staff were finding it difficult to meet both teaching and research demands and yet the university is built on the assumption that these go hand-in-hand. The need to continually meet the demands of productivity sometimes conflicted with quality in research and peer review at all stages of research all of which required a little extra time.

This study was followed by a closer look at the emerging IUE research culture (Macdonald, 2004b), where issues of agency and collegiality were arising in the distribution of resources. The analysis covered the period 1999-2004. There was also a steady reluctance to accept the dominant view that formal reporting of research is more important than development work, such as work with teachers and school in the field. Changes in the external research environment seemed to be making themselves felt with some willing and able to respond to the new demands, and others not. Many traditions brought in by the merging institutions were still being upheld though more and more the advantages of diversity were being promoted and appreciated. General changes in society were inviting new areas of research and the social construction of new ideas. It was concluded that the value of research to the practice of education would be particularly vulnerable unless the IUE could find ways to acknowledge and reward a full range of scholarly activity, as suggested by Boyer (1990), from discovery (research) through integration and application to teaching. It is not surprising that some teachers at the IUE
have taken some time getting to grips with the complex and composite central activity of a university.

*The central activity and the task of teaching*

University teachers generally have the freedom to design their own curriculum (Geirsdóttir, 2008) though this may not always be the case in teacher education. In Iceland teacher education programs have enjoyed this academic freedom for nearly forty years. The IUE is however atypical of a university environment in that it has had no departments, only courses of study. This can be unsettling, particularly for some new teachers, who need good luck, a mentor or both to find their niche in teaching. This also means that some teachers have or wish to teach overtime while others may not have enough hours to fulfil their teaching obligation. The rules guiding the division of labour with regard to teaching may be at odds with the need to do research or to work on research ideas with students.

One development has been the emergence of informal groups, there being a variety with which an individual teacher may choose to be affiliated. These include study committees which manage course offerings in the major subject areas, specialist interest groups which can be established by teachers or research groups, or centres of activity on specific topics which are becoming a feature of the research landscape.

The teaching role of the IUE has expanded and diversified since 2000 and it was in 2004 that the framework for a new curriculum was introduced and committees appointed to develop proposals for their line of study. A five year curriculum was the long term goal and this was to begin with a revision of the three year curriculum.

Criteria to be met in the design of all new courses and programs were 1) that they should be research-related, 2) that they should have connections with practice in the field and 3) that they should encourage creativity and the use of new media. These three criteria reflect the relationship of teacher education to its environment; a need to make research more visible but at the same time looking for new ways to be connected to the field. The
demand for training such that teachers became creative and skilled at communication was seen in part as a way to integrate the diverse demands being made of students.

One of the key arguments for the training of compulsory teachers was that the amount of time to be spent on courses related to subjects taught in the compulsory school was to be increased and that students would choose only one main area of specialisation rather than two, though there would be some choice within the area. This was a response to the public debate on education and is not unique to Iceland (see, for example, Bergsten & Grevholm, n.d.).

**A culturally more advanced and more integrated central activity**

From the discussion above it can be seen that what might be defined as a culturally more advanced central activity (CACA) of teacher education has been emerging in the IUE over the last few years.

The research base had achieved a level of development which enabled constructive change in teaching. Senior management was confident that the new curriculum for teacher education would meet criteria of being research based, connected to the field and making innovative demands of teachers and that criticisms of inadequate levels of subject knowledge in newly trained teachers would be met. By increasing the length of study by two years, there would be even more opportunity for connections with research and with the field.

Understandings regarding the CACA are developing as groups of professionals within the IUE work on different issues of policy and practice arising out of the change procedure. A current and clear example is the development of guidelines for the integration of field-based activities into the teacher education curriculum (Sigurðardóttir et al., 2008). This is to be achieved by creating partnerships with “home schools” with which students are associated throughout their course of study. The home schools will have a formal and
ongoing responsibility. This development is in line with the expansive learning approach advocated by Jóhannsdóttir at this conference (Jóhannsdóttir, T., 2008).

The object activity

Here a changing object, the development of a new program at the IUE, is described, using conceptual tools which activity theory offers for the analysis of change and development. For the purposes of this study, I limit the discussion to the core activity of the program designed for compulsory school teachers.

The activity is object-oriented i.e. the provision of a course of study in the teacher education program and has a motive i.e. preparing students for the task of teaching in compulsory school classroom settings (Engeström, 2004, Mäkitalo, 2005). The activity is evident when individual teachers and specialist communities of colleagues review, design, develop and implement a course of study. The community may be a small group constructing one or more courses or a larger group, members of which are negotiating for a place in the whole program.

Cultural tools come into play: on the one hand knowledge and views of practice, specialist knowledge and research findings and on the other hand experiences with textbooks/learning materials, deliberative processes and the curriculum under revision. These tools are used by teacher educators and their fellow specialists in order to create a course of study and work with it. Not all educators use the same tools. Using these tools is a process both of reproduction and transformation and results in a constant interplay between material artefacts and ideas, theories and concepts, and experience.

Within the IUE recent change has been directed at an expansive cycle leading to a “societally new object” (Mäkitalo, 2005) arising perhaps from “culturally more advanced central activity”. The course of study and the choice and use of cultural tools change as new tools are introduced, new rules are adopted and specialists leave or join the groups or
the community. The division of labour changes with new leadership and new positions being created within the organisation. It can also be that the course of study continues its development independently of the specialist community and the particular tools used to create it, because of the choice of specialists chosen to work on the course and regulations on course size and timetables, for example.

Academic leadership introduced specific new criteria to be met in individual courses, a course of study and the program as a whole, with the motive of enabling new teachers to deal with a range of more complex situations in schools and classrooms. Tenured positions have been created around these revisions, with new posts in educational studies (including psychology, philosophy, sociology) and no new posts in subject-areas. It could be said that an earlier motive was to prepare students for classroom teaching, but the new motive has a wider dimension, i.e. is to prepare students not only for classrooms but also for schools and for their own professional development. This is in line with changes in the management of schools, the role of school principals and trade union agreements between teachers and local authorities.

Within the IUE there are tensions in this time of transition as some specialists still work according to the previous motive and object.

Primary contradictions arise from differences in the use value vs. the exchange value within components of the system and any system reflects an attempt to resolve the contradictions, albeit only temporarily. One example is differing opinions on the the object (the course of study) with regard to the use value vs. the exchange value of time spent in schools. Another example is the different underlying theoretical bases used as cultural tools in developing the course of study; where the use value may be deemed not to match the exchange value. The need state which is apparent at this stage may take the form of discontent and intense debate about the purpose or nature of their work.
Secondary contradictions appear when components of the activity develop out-of-step, perhaps even in different directions. A real example is the advertising of new tenured positions in educational studies at the same time that a large group of untenured teachers continue to carry much of the teaching in subject-based areas. By now IUE teachers are experiencing a double bind situation where components of the system are not aligned with one another and an individual and collective search for solutions begins (Mäkitalo, 2005).

The new course of study has now been introduced for one or two cohorts though there are still cohorts working according to the previous course of study. Teachers begin to work with the new course of study developed with a new motive. While the students themselves only experience one course of study, that for which they are enrolled, most of the teaching staff find themselves teaching according to both the old and the new. It is here that tertiary contradictions appear as there is a final struggle for ideological space. If the community cannot make the transition to the new motive and object, change may not be expansive. If however it succeeds then the new activity starts to consolidate into the dominant activity.

When neighbouring activity systems react to a transformed activity system, quaternary contradictions appear. The transformed system has been developed by the teacher educators, with a new set of cultural tools, emerging specialist communities and a changing but largely unspoken division of labour. The revised object is the new course of study with a motive to serve schools and not classrooms. The new dominant activity now faces a challenge from the response of the neighbouring activities before final consolidation can take place. We now turn our attention to the neighbouring activities, chief of which are the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture and the University of Iceland (UI).
Neighbouring activities

In the 1970s ...

The notion of integrating all teacher education into one institution was officially discussed in the 1970s. In 1978, a bill was prepared to move the Department of Education and teacher education for secondary teachers from the UI to the University College. Interestingly, at the same time the object-activity of teaching within the University College was being challenged by students. The students felt that the University College was not responding to changes in the education sector after a new general law on compulsory education had been passed in 1974. The student initiative resulted in a culturally more advanced teaching activity and newly defined object-activity in what was known as “learning by themes” (Jónasson, 2004), but it had little effect on early research activity. Jónasson found it surprising, “how much influence institutions outside the university seem to have had. This is most apparent in the effect of the curricula which followed in the wake of the law on basic schooling from 1974” (Jónasson, 2004, p. 3).

The central activity of research began to emerge slowly after the upgrading of the college to university level in 1971 (Jóhannsdóttir, G., 2006). Factors which supported research were to be found in the law from 1971, regulations from 1974 and the bill on the movement of the UI department to the University College. Hindrances were to be found in the lack of tradition of research in the educational and social sciences and reluctance to appoint academic staff.

Higher education and issues of identity

The 1998 merger took place on 1st January 1998 after being signed into law on 31st December 1997. Few changes were introduced immediately. As committees were created or new members appointed there was an emphasis on bringing in representatives from all four merged organisations, though the University College occupied centre stage –
physically and administratively – and had a tradition of research in place, with a peer-reviewed journal, public lectures, an annual conference and some research grants.

The IUE continued to build up its internal research operations over the next few years and the rector and other senior staff worked at supporting the public image of being a research university (Macdonald, 2004b). New and larger research projects were being developed. There were occasions when it seemed necessary to refer to the IUE as a research university, though for some the only real research university in the country was the UI. This was made clear for example when contracts were signed between the Ministry and the state universities. Only the UI got two separate contracts, one for teaching and one for research. The IUE and the University of Akureyri had to be satisfied with one document only, in which research was discussed in the fifth of five sections.

As the visibility of the IUE as a research organisation increased the rector turned his attention to another issue i.e. the status of teacher education in higher education. For many in UI knowledge, in particular subject knowledge, is a commodity that can be bartered for in the merged institution. The bill for a five-year course is now before parliament.

Enrolment numbers in the coming spring are susceptible to the nature of the trade union agreement up for renegotiation and the outcome of the bill before parliament. There are several unanswered questions: Will teachers have a better salary? Will it be worth their while to study longer? Will local authorities recognise the call for more specialised knowledge in teaching, learning and the running of schools? A longer course of study invites a temporary shortage in supply of qualified teachers and maybe in enrolment of new trainees, lowering costs in the short term but leading to increased costs in the long run with more qualified staff. Opposing the longer course of study may look like it does not have the interests of schools, parents and learners at heart and questions the knowledge and skills base which teachers need.
Issues of quality and the Bologna framework

Higher education in Iceland now operates within the Bologna framework. Thus the curriculum goals have been aligned and/or rewritten in terms of quality indicators arising from the so-called Dublin Descriptors. The emphasis on skills rather than knowledge is not necessarily in keeping with ideas on teacher education held by some members of staff but course leaders have tried to incorporate the new guidelines in the curriculum.

The IUE made a submission for accreditation as an institute of higher education in the social sciences to the Ministry in September 2007 and was visited in early October by an expert committee. The committee report is being made available as this is written. The accreditation submission was managed by a steering group with some of the material on the curriculum being supplied by deans and other administrators and other material by the rector’s office itself. Academic staff had to submit short CVs in a standardised format designed by the steering group. This particular process was characterised by a tension between notions of academic freedom and the need to acknowledge that a collective interest was at stake. In the end all academic staff and most others in professional positions met the deadline.

The expert panel recommended that the IUE be an accredited HEI (Expert Committee Report, 2008). Some of its remarks are as follows (p. 34, 35):

- The panel feels confident that the accelerating emphasis on research will influence positively the integration of present IUE researchers and teachers into the coming merged university.
- A well working coooperative development project is in place between the University of Iceland and the IUE in terms of Ugla, the information system.
- … the panel is satisfied that the programmes under accreditation at IUE are all linked to learning outcomes that accord with the National Qualifications Framework.
- … IUE would benefit from a more focused approach which would identify international as well as national universities that could provide relevant benchmarks for IUE teaching and research.

The imminent merger and the need to be judged by external standards are evident in the remarks of the experts.

4 http://www.menntamalaraduneyti.is/malaflokkar/visindamal/vidurkenning/
Restructuring the University of Iceland

Closer cooperation between the UI and the IUE has been developing for some time (see next section). Practical examples include complex arrangements concerning information technology and the relatively straightforward sharing of facilities on graduation day. The formal initiation of the actual merger process can be traced though to a feasibility study of different organisational arrangements commissioned by the rectors of the two universities in 2002 (Nýsir hf., 2002).

At the same time that the option of merging IUE and UI was becoming more of a reality, the newly elected rector of UI decided that the time was ripe for vision-building and restructuring within UI. The vision is ambitious; to become one of the top 100 universities in the world. The level of disruption is acute, in many cases more acute than that being experienced in IUE. On the same day that the IUE and UI merge, a whole new structure will come into being. Up until now there have been 11 faculties in UI, varying greatly in size, from dentistry to social sciences. Within most faculties there have been several departments. In the new structure these existing activities have been rearranged into four schools (humanities, social sciences, health and life sciences, engineering and physical sciences) with 24 departments, five of which remain unchanged (see Figure 2).

The IUE will remain administratively virtually intact, as the School of Education (SoE), with its four main programs becoming four departments; teacher education, sport and health sciences, social education and leisure studies, and education studies.

The process of developing the new university prospectus is a cultural tool designed to reinforce the new structure of UI, with programs being offered by five schools. The process in some respects has been easiest for the IUE both because the object activity of the IUE and the School of Education (SoE) are fundamentally the same, while most other academic activity is being subjected to environmental and structural change.
In some ways not much has changed since 1978. Most members of the Department of Educational Studies (DES) at UI expressed severe reservations, shortly after the merger was announced, about moving their activities (and themselves) into the School of Education. Differences in the research culture, the central activities and the object-activity were not necessarily to their liking. Questions of research status and research opportunities were key issues. Five months before the merger date IU staff in the DES finally agreed to move to the School of Education, in 2009, a year after the merger actually takes place (this will be discussed again in the next section).

An agreement was reached for the academic year 2008-2009 on the division of labour with regard to the one-year postgraduate certificate program for secondary teachers, with the DES in School of Social Science seeing to the on-campus program and the IUE (shortly to be the School of Education) seeing to the distance learning program. Students can however complete their studies or enroll themselves in graduate programs in education in both schools.
Management and the merger process

Much of the energy being put into the restructuring of the UI and the IUE/UI merger process is going into an assessment and/or creation of rules by which to run a university, attract and retain well-qualified staff and provide them opportunities for research and development. In a very recent paper, Ogawa, Crain, Loomis and Ball (2008) have suggested that scholars who study learning and scholars who study educational organisation need to engage in discussion. The framework which they suggest combines elements of CHAT and institutional theory. This section on management is very much in the spirit of their argument.

Management of educational activities

Theories of open systems suggest that educational organisations find different ways of interacting with their environment (Hoy & Miskel, 2005). In cases where the environment is viewed as a source of information or resources, a project approach is adopted, with targets to be met according to time schedules. This may involve the development of a ‘buffer’ which insulates the core activity of the organisation, in our case teaching and research, from its environment. Managers who are not involved in the core activity have the task of processing and filtering information and resources from the environment to the core activity and making decisions about what it is that needs to reach the core activity. The managers are expected to work efficiently, staying within budgets, and also to ensure that information and resources are fed back into the environment from the organisation.

In other cases the organisation mirrors the values and traditions of the environment and will model its activities accordingly. Conformity is important, efficiency less so. Again a buffer might be developed. Here too the core activity might be protected from the environment and might be able to develop high levels of professionalism. As universities have multiplied in number and increased in size, issues of conformity or diversity within or between institutions have arisen. Larsen (2000) says that this can be considered in different
ways. Conformity might arise through coercion, imitation or normative pressure; regulative standards play a part. Another perspective is that each organization is unique, characterized by its own norms and values, leading to stability within organizations and thus differences between them.

The rise of middle managers in higher education can be interpreted as the development of buffers as has been the case at the IUE with changes over time to the administrative structure, where middle and senior managers make many decisions and the core activity is not necessarily always involved, as one might expect in traditional academic governance.

It is of interest to consider how the merger itself has been managed, given the notion of core and buffer activities. It might also be of interest to explore the extent to which buffer activities actually become neighbouring activities for the central activities of teaching and research, but this will not be done here.

**Merger activity**

Lessons can be learnt from international experiences of mergers (Harman & Harman, 2003). Of particular interest here are those concerning the merger negotiation process and its implementation. Shared vision as well as strong, effective and creative leadership are needed. Cultural and symbolic factors are important and all parties must be willing to search for compromises. The process should be open, with wide sharing of information. Harman and Harman suggest that normal internal academic decision-making and governance processes should be used as much as possible.

The origins of the present merger lie in strategic decisions made by the current IUE rector both in his previous position as director of research and development (until 2000) and since then as the rector. He came into the IUE in the 1980s from a strong and influential neighbouring community, the development division within the Ministry of Education. He developed common understandings with the UI rector in the early 2000s and
then began to speak publicly of the benefits to the country of mergers in higher education (Morgunblāðið, 2003).

In 2004 the new Minister of Education engineered a merger between the University of Reykjavik, a private university with a focus on information and technology, business and law and the public University of Technology, creating a large institution which could compete with UI in several areas. Her next move was to ask the IUE and UI rectors whether a feasibility study on a merger would be supported by them. The UI rector was then new to her post, but in favour of the study.

A feasibility study was carried out in early 2006, which was then followed by the development of a project plan for a merger by early 2007. These reports were used in support of a bill to parliament and the merger process became official when Law 37/2007 was passed by the Icelandic parliament on the 17th March 2007.

**Merger management and academia**

A steering committee to plan, implement and monitor the merger process was appointed almost immediately, to operate from 17th April 2007 until 31st December 2008. One of the tools used has been the setting up of working committees. Typically the working committee prepares a report, and a response to the report is prepared for the two rectors, who then themselves provide comments on the response. The working committees cover the following topics (own translation):

1. On information, library services and the development of teaching
2. On the information system Ugla
3. On the document management system
4. On the development of a policy on distance learning
5. On the organisation and implementation of programs in the new School of Education
6. On the integration of external web of UI and IUE
7. On the rights of students in the merger process.

It is notable that while most of the issues are practical and related to processes and infrastructure, the programs of study and organisation of the SoE and its mandate are to be

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6 [http://sameining.khi.is/](http://sameining.khi.is/)
addressed by the fifth committee, i.e. one of the merger tools will be used to work on an object-activity which is part of the core or central activity of the IUE.

The terms of reference for the fifth committee cover the preparation of proposals on the following issues (own translation):

- The overall organisation of teacher education and social pedagogy in the merged universities, for all school levels and with reference to concurrent or consecutive models.
- The management of teacher education.
- The relationship of teacher education to the academic disciplines.
- Quality indicators, including the productivity assessment scheme.
- Ways to strengthen educational research.
- The involvement of the School of Education in inservice training of university teachers.
- Ways to organise inservice education for other teachers and professionals.
- Any other issues of importance to the merger and the goals of UI.

The report of the committee was finalised before Christmas, but has not (yet) been made public though it has been submitted to the merger project and to the IUE University Council. The working committee met 23 times in the second half of 2007. The IUE rector says that this particular committee was considered to be of particular importance by the project committee, and he was asked to chair it himself.

I mentioned earlier that the members of the DES, which has been part of the social sciences faculty, found the idea of a move to the SoE very distressing, on several accounts. Little progress was made on this issue in the fifth committee. It seemed that a stalemate had been reached until, at the initiative of the DES chairman who was a member of the fifth committee, academic staff of the DES and some senior academic staff at the IUE met twice outside the confines of the committee. An artefact used at the latter of the meetings was a spontaneous schematic diagram of how the degrees offered by the DES and IUE made a coherent whole. This was nothing more than a visual representation, an outline of common object activity, but surprisingly seems not to have been used by the committee itself. One of the fifth committee members, at this informal meeting, said “I have never looked at the problem like that”.

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The committee exercise itself was frustrating for many of the members, and there are several instances in the report of a minority view being tabled. The committee was known, only half-jokingly, “the small and horrid committee”.

We do not yet know whether report from the fifth committee has the potential to change the object activity and the central activity of teaching and of research. Indeed research is only one of eight areas to be addressed. The rector of the IUE says that the report has uncertain status, as it is only a submission to the project management team.

In this case the “project management” approach to the merger may have been less effective than if more familiar procedures of academic governance had been allowed to take its course. This was a case of buffer to buffer; no central activity committees were engaged in the process. The next academic year may be more productive when those taking part in core activities, and committees within those, must or will work together and academic governance and curriculum deliberation becomes necessary.

*In the interests of teacher education…*

By 2007, when the law on the merger has been passed, IUE had approved a new vision for teacher education and committees of IUE teachers were hard at work preparing proposals on how the vision could be implemented.

The merging of academic cultures that are historically non-complementary can be difficult. There are ‘horizontal’ mergers between organisations with the same range of disciplines or ‘vertical’ mergers where courses are offered in different areas, and Harman and Harman (2003) suggest that horizontal mergers may be easier.

It seems that mergers involving teacher education and a traditional university would involve both aspects, horizontal and vertical. Possible tensions between the traditional disciplines for example in humanities or the sciences and professional education are mirrored in the seemingly never-ending debate within teacher education on subject-based knowledge versus pedagogy.
A proposal for the actual detailed planning and management of the merger was submitted to the Minister of Education in November 2006 (Áætlun um sameiningu). The following statement, in my own translation, appears in a section about the the object-activity of course provision and particularly of teacher education:

The committee on the feasibility\(^7\) of merging UI and IUE [in a report from 7\(^{th}\) April 2006] points out that with the merger an opportunity will be created to reorganise all courses in education and development, teacher education included. There will also be a possibility of increasing the diversity of teacher education, providing continuity in teacher education for all school levels and strengthening graduate studies at master’s and doctoral level, as well as developing more flexible learning opportunities. They also say that through sharing and integration of courses of study that attention should be paid to content offered in both universities and that it will be important to mobilize teachers from different departments in UI and teachers in the IUE in order to cooperate and integrate in the interests of teacher education.

A closer reading of this text indicates that change if not improvement is an underlying theme. Using the merger – as a tool – in the interests of teacher education – there will be an opportunity of:

… reorganising all courses in education
… increasing diversity in teacher education
… providing continuity in teacher education for all school levels
… strengthening graduate studies at master’s and doctoral level
… developing more flexible learning
… sharing and integration of courses

It is hard to imagine reading this that the changes then well underway in the central activity of the IUE and the object activity were being recognised or given credibility by those managing the merger process. My question of the rationale for the merger reappears; why improvement?

This issue was followed up in a short recent interview with the rector. He says that while others spoke of improving teacher education in IUE he always spoke of improvement in general, at both IUE and UI. It was important to compromise on some issues in order to achieve (his) long-term goal of moving IUE into a strong research

\(^7\) The members of the feasibility committee included the two rectors, one senior member of staff from IUE and from UI and a specialist from Statistics Iceland. Two specialists from the Ministry also worked with the committee.
environment with better resources and more opportunities than the IUE could achieve as a separate institution.

Conclusion

In this study three lines of development related to the central activity and the culturally more advance central activity have been under study. One has been the strengthening of the research activity at the IUE, the second the development of the new five-year curriculum at the IUE for teachers in compulsory schools, and the third those aspects of the process of merging the IUE and the UI which relate to the object-activity i.e. teacher education.

The underlying problem being tackled was to understand better why one of the stated rationales for the merger was the improvement of teacher education i.e. the exact object-activity being addressed from within the central activity of the IUE. My supposition was that the explanation might be found in the response of the neighbouring activities to the idea of the merger, particularly the Ministry and the UI.

The Minister of Education was proactive with regard to the merger and linked it to the development of a five-year course of study. Leaders in the central activity linked the new course with connections to research, a strong relationship with the field and creative communication. An assumed benefit would be more time for students to attain specialist knowledge and the IUE chose to call attention to this benefit in discussion with other institutions.

UI has had mixed feelings. Some academics believe that teachers need more specialist subject-based knowledge and feel that the IU could make a positive contribution to making this a reality. At the same time some UI academics feel that education as a field of study has not much to offer; the solution lies entirely in what teachers know, rather than in teaching-learning processes, school environments or socioeconomic factors. And this is
where it gets difficult, because this same unremarkable field of study will ask for a larger piece of cake to support its culturally more advanced central activity, and may even get it.

After the merger the Ministry will still be a neighbouring activity, both as the ministry which deals with education and teacher education, and as the chief policy-maker with regard to higher education. Some of the interactions of the School of Education will be mediated by the newly structured UI.

A crucial issue for the School of Education will be its relationship with the other four schools. There will no merging of premises for at least another five years. Slowly staff from the SoE will be represented on UI committees. The dean of the SoE will be under the UI rector.

The strategic issue is this: If the IUE wants to improve teacher education, should it look to the other four schools as neighbouring activities and part of its external environment and seek information and resources from them to manage its own central activities and define its own object-activity or should it try to move to redefine its central activity in the landscape of Academia, adopting the norms and discourse of Academia, even down to academic gowns and heroic music at graduation?

**Next steps**

Parallel to this real-time study, interview data is being collected from IUE staff, particularly subject specialists, on the function of university-based teacher education and their own role in that education. Despite the real-time aspect it could also be said that this study began many years ago and is being revived at intervals through conversations with the literature.

**Embedded activities**

At a theoretical level I would like to explore the notions of neighbouring activity systems and interacting activity systems to investigate whether it might be useful to introduce a
notion of embedded activities, in which I would like to consider whether we can use the notion of interactions between a core activity and a buffer activity (Hoy & Miskel, 2004) to understand management of educational situations. To what extent is a core activity a central activity? What characterises a buffer activity? When might it be useful to think of it as a neighbouring activity?

If an activity can be embedded then one of my interests will be to consider “freedom of action” within activity systems. Engeström (2005, p. 89) has said that “In today's activity theory the focus is shifting toward analyzing 'freedom of action' in complex collective settings undergoing transformations.”

**Issues of well-being**

Issues of well-being, motivation and identity in the workplace have been raised in recent work by Mäkitalo (2005) and Roth (2007). I will try to understand what these issues – emotion, identity and motivation - might mean for teacher education:

However, the relationship between activity and emotions is not a direct one: it is mediated by motives. According to Leontjev, the object of activity is its true collective or societal motive. It is under these systems, within collective systems of activity, that individual subjects construct their personal sense of this collective motive. Emotions are internal signals of the success with the object in the direction of the motive. Emotions mark situations and objects (Mäkitalo, 2005, p. 95).

The workplace-related motivation is high when the subject realizes both individual and collective interests in the same action.

Identity, too, is an integral part of human activity and an effect of emotion. Who I am with respect to others and myself is fundamentally related to my participation in collective activity and to individual and collective emotional valences arising from (orientation to) face-to-face interactions with others (Roth, 2007, p. 60).

Roth goes on to suggest that workers must provide evidence to others that they are competent. They must function as constitutive members of their workplace whether or not they associate themselves with the motives of the activity. He suggests that motivation in the workplace can only be high if both individual and collective interests can be met. A problem will be to try understand the extent to which teacher education in Academia attracts staff who feel that life in Academia will meet their individual interests and that
they themselves contribute to its collective interest. This of course begs the question: what is the collective interest of teacher education?
References


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## Appendix 1  Overview of developments in the last century

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<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher education</strong></td>
<td>Some teacher training at Flensborg</td>
<td>1908 a law on teacher education passed, teacher training college (TTC) established</td>
<td>Teacher training for elementary schools stable at the TTC</td>
<td>New laws on education passed, law on teacher education from 1947</td>
<td>Moved to a new building in 1962, turmoil in secondary education in the 1960s leads to massive enrolment in TE</td>
<td>1988 Law extending course from three to four years, new curriculum prepared; implementation postponed in 1991 and rescinded in 1994</td>
<td>Five year course of study, according to Bologna model (3+2+3)</td>
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<td><strong>Upgrading</strong></td>
<td>Three year training course at secondary level extended to four years in 1944</td>
<td>Not possible to enforce stricter entry conditions into the TTC</td>
<td>1971 Law moves TTC to university level, University College of Education (UCE)</td>
<td>1998 training of sports teachers, nursery school teachers and social pedagogues moved to university level</td>
<td>Teachers require five years of study to become certified teachers</td>
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<td><strong>Mergers</strong></td>
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<td>1978 Parliamentary proposal to move education out of UI to UCE strongly opposed by UI</td>
<td>1998 IUE; merger of four organisations</td>
<td>IUE becomes one of five schools at UI in 2008 (SOE)</td>
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<td><strong>University education</strong></td>
<td>Students go abroad, mainly to Denmark</td>
<td>1911 the University of Iceland is established</td>
<td>University graduates teach in gymnasiaisons</td>
<td>Department of educational studies established</td>
<td>UI provides one year certification for students with a first degree</td>
<td>Small but strong department of educational studies (DES)</td>
<td>UI undergoes restructuring in 2008 SOE joins UI in 2008 DES moves to SOE in 2009</td>
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UI undergoes restructuring in 2008

SOE joins UI in 2008

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