

BUILDING AEROPLANES IN THE SKY

How do you maintain business as usual, and merge the ways of working?



Graham Rogers, SSA
Deputy Vice Chancellor
University of South
Wales. Formerly
Deputy Vice Chancellor
University of Wales,
Newport

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I recently watched a short promotional video for an IT company that likened the retrofit of a new IT system to building an aeroplane in mid-flight. Having recently been part of merging two universities, the analogy struck a chord.

The merger of two universities is a complex and time consuming process which takes place against the backdrop of business as usual, and providing the best possible learning experience for students during the change.

The University of Wales, Newport and the University of Glamorgan merged to form the University of South Wales (USW) on 11 April 2013.

The process leading up to the legal integration followed the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding in July 2012, a period of due diligence, obtaining the necessary external consents, support from the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales and of course the underpinning formal decision of the two governing bodies to merge.

In this period there are a number of legal and governance boxes that need to be ticked. However, for most stakeholders, the students, the staff and external communities, other issues dominated their agenda.

Mergers, particularly in the run up to integration and immediately after, are periods of inevitable uncertainty. Completing the formal integration in a period of eight months from signing a Memorandum of Understanding was a vigorous timescale, given the complexity of a university merger.

The timely legal enactment of the merger reduced uncertainty. Achieving formal integration needed absolute clarity on what had to be in place at the point of integration, and what could be resolved later.



At integration, new governance arrangements need to be in place, the ability to employ staff and the consents and regulations that enable the new university to be able to make awards.

The curriculum and course portfolio are developed over a longer period of time, to allow for reflection and development with the full engagement of colleagues.

A big decision was to ensure that new branding and signage was in place immediately following integration. All staff had a USW email address, staff cards, lanyards etc at integration.

Branding and signage sends out a strong message internally and externally and helps to move the language of merger from 'we and you' to 'us'.

Organisational culture or the 'social glue' that emphasises shared values, beliefs, understanding and social norms, is often cited in the literature as a key factor that leads to mergers failing.

Following integration, the new university has engaged with staff, students and other stakeholders to develop shared values and the university's strategic plan. This process was

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phased over nine months, and is providing the framework for curriculum development and the process of establishing a distinct USW culture and identity.

The Integration Project continues. Apart from harmonising staff terms and conditions of employment, a direct result of merger and a TUPE transfer, the harmonisation and development of business systems and processes to meet the operational needs of a new multi-campus university is part of a process of continuous business improvement which would take place anyway.

A significant area of continuing development is the Student Record System which is at the hub of a number of connected systems. This is both a challenge and opportunity in any university merger.

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Although we are still finessing our new aeroplane, we are confident that already we are flying higher and stronger.

Seven example questions for building your aeroplane in the sky...

1. How will you manage the development of your Memorandum Of Understanding between the partners?	
2. How will you manage the period of due diligence between the partners?	
3. How will the governance of the collaborative service be structured?	
4. How will you ensure that there is absolute clarity on what has to be in place at the point of integration, and what could be resolved later?	
5. At integration how will you ensure that governance arrangements are in place, the ability to employ staff and the consents and regulations that enable the new service to function?	
6. How will you ensure that new branding, signage and email addresses will be in place immediately following integration?	
7. How will you embed the organisational culture that emphasises shared values, beliefs, understanding and social norms?	