The Construction of Support and Opposition
A Study of an Attempted Higher Education Merger

Mats Persson
The Construction of Support and Opposition
A Study of an Attempted Higher Education Merger

Mats Persson
The Construction of Support and Opposition - A Study of an Attempted Higher Education Merger

Mats Persson

DISSERTATION

Karlstad University Studies | 2015:47

urn:nbn:se:kau:diva-38063

ISSN 1403-8099


© The author

Distribution:
Karlstad University
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
Department of Working Life Science
SE-651 88 Karlstad, Sweden
+46 54 700 10 00

Print: Universitetstryckeriet, Karlstad 2015
Table of contents

PART ONE – SETTING THE STAGE .................................................. 7

Chapter 1 – Introduction ............................................................... 8
  Purpose .................................................................................... 11
  A discursive approach ............................................................. 13
  Demarcation ........................................................................... 15
  Outline ................................................................................... 16

Chapter 2 – Mergers in higher education .................................. 18
  Introduction ............................................................................. 18
  Education market .................................................................... 25
  Academic drift ......................................................................... 28
  The restructuring of the Norwegian non-university higher education sector ............................................ 32
  Summary ................................................................................ 36

Chapter 3 – Methodology ............................................................ 37
  Methods .................................................................................. 37
  Data collection ......................................................................... 40
    Interviews .............................................................................. 40
    Document studies .................................................................. 45
  Data analysis ........................................................................... 47
    Memos ................................................................................ 52
    Method triangulation ............................................................ 55
    Translation issues ................................................................. 55
  Disposition ............................................................................. 56
  Summary ................................................................................ 57

Chapter 4 – Conceptual framework ........................................... 59
  Discourse ............................................................................... 59
  Support, opposition, idea and operationalisation ................. 62
  Outwards and inwards perspective ....................................... 65
  Modern and traditional perspective ...................................... 67
  Summary ................................................................................ 71

Chapter 5 – Presentation of characters and case ....................... 72
  The three University Colleges ............................................... 78
    Buskerud University College (Buskerud) ................................ 79
    Vestfold University College (Vestfold) ............................... 80
    Østfold University College (Østfold) .................................... 81
The project organisation ................................................................. 82
Summary...................................................................................... 83

PART TWO – THE MERGER PROCESS ........................................ 84

Chapter 6 – Act one: Initiation (– March 2010) ......................... 85
Report – A comprehensive view II .......................................... 85
The understanding of the merger process .............................. 92
Ambition ................................................................................. 98
University status as a premise for a merger ............................ 98
Opposing the idea of university status ..................................... 99
Opposing merger ..................................................................... 102
Outwards perspective ................................................................. 103
Summary .................................................................................. 114

Chapter 7 – Act two: Hesitation (April 2010 – November 2010)... 115
Report – Østfold University College’s institutional cooperation –
investigation of alternatives to merging with Buskerud
University College and Vestfold University College .................. 115
Consultative statements ............................................................... 119
Third merger partner ................................................................. 122
Summary .................................................................................. 123

Chapter 8 – Act three: Investigation
(December 2010 – December 2011).......................................... 126
Report – Vision, academic profile and strategic objectives
(June 2011) .............................................................................. 126
Vision ....................................................................................... 127
Academic profile ..................................................................... 129
Strategic objectives ................................................................. 132
Consultative statements (Buskerud) ....................................... 135
Consultative statements (Vestfold) ......................................... 137
Consultative statements (Østfold) .......................................... 138
University status as a consequence of a merger ..................... 140
The due diligence .................................................................... 142
What about those PhDs? ......................................................... 150
Ownership .............................................................................. 151
Continue the development until merger or not ....................... 154
Strengthening or weakening the bachelor’s and master’s programmes .................................................. 158
Inwards perspective ................................................................. 159
Summary .................................................................................. 162
Chapter 9 – Act four: Termination  
(January 2012 – March 2012) ............................................................. 165

The note of concern (January 2012) .............................................. 165
Report – The organisation of a merged university college  
(February 2012) ............................................................................... 166
  Consultative statements (Buskerud) ............................................. 173
  Consultative statements (Vestfold) .............................................. 176
  Consultative statements (Østfold) .............................................. 177
Resource allocation ........................................................................... 180
The last board meeting (March 2012) ............................................ 182
Epilogue ............................................................................................. 183
Summary ........................................................................................... 184

PART THREE – THE CONSTRUCTION OF SUPPORT AND OPPOSITION ................................................................. 185

Chapter 10 – Support and opposition ............................................. 186
  Concluding remarks ...................................................................... 190
References .......................................................................................... 193
List of figures

Figure 2.1. A typology for higher education mergers
(Source: Goedegebuure, 1992 p.24) .......................................................... 20

Figure 4.1. Inward and outward perspectives on competition ....................... 66
Figure 4.2. Traditional and modern perspectives on academic drift ............ 68

Figure 5.1. Map of southern Norway ............................................................ 79

Figure 6.1. Stages in the process of merger (Eastman & Lang, 2001, p. 103) ... 96
Figure 6.2. Stages in the process of marriage ............................................. 97
Figure 6.3. Outwards perspective ................................................................. 104

Figure 8.1. Inwards perspective ................................................................... 160

List of tables

Table 3.1. Respondents from the steering committee ................................. 42
Table 3.2. Respondents from the project secretariat ................................. 43
Table 3.3. Other respondents ........................................................................ 43
Table 3.4. Reports and other documents analysed .................................... 45

Table 4.1. Conceptual map of support, opposition, idea and operationalisation ................................................................. 64
Table 4.2. Discourses of support and opposition in relevance to academic drift and market ............................................................... 69
Table 4.3. Conceptual pairs ......................................................................... 70

Table 5.1. Timeline for the merger process ............................................... 76
Table 5.2. Campus, faculties and students in Buskerud ............................... 80
Table 5.3. Campus, faculties and students in Vestfold ............................... 80
Table 5.4. Campus, faculties and students in Østfold ............................... 81
Table 5.5. Campus, faculties and students in the three university colleges .... 81
Table 5.6. Education offered at the three university colleges .................... 82
Acknowledgements

First of all I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all respondents participating in this study. Without your interest in telling me your stories this project would have been impossible.

I would like to thank my supervisors Professor Jan Ch. Karlsson at Karlstad University and Professor Tor Claussen at Østfold University College. Professor Karlsson has been a solid rock to lean on when I have tried to find my way through the maze. With his profound knowledge and unpretentiousness he is the embodiment of the teacher Khalil Gibran speaks of in The Prophet: “If he is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind”. Although Professor Claussen has taken a less extensive role as supervisor I owe him many thanks for our discussions about my conceptual framework.

A special thanks to Associate Professor Lars Geschwind at KTH Royal Institute of Technology for constructive and valuable comments on my manuscript at the final seminar. The Department of Working Life Science at Karlstad University has been a good place to be a doctoral student. The annual PhD day with presentations by fellow students and dinner at Jan Ch. and his wife Lise’s house are highlights I will remember with joy. I have also very much appreciated discussing and “hanging out” with my fellow doctoral students and would like to thank Jo Ese, Tora Dahl Jakobsen, Helena Lundberg, Jennifer Hobbins, Line Holth, Pia Renman, Alexis Rydell, Jan Evert Petersson and Inger-Lise Hansen.

I would like to thank the Faculty of Business, Languages and Social Sciences represented by Dean Kristina Lind and Head of Department, Theo Schewe, and my colleagues Frode Haaland, Jan Moren, Tom B. Gundersen, Egil Skorstad, Julianne Cheek, Arve Negaard, Ivar Jonsson and Kjeld Qvortrup at The Department of Organisation and Leadership, Østfold University College.

A very special thanks to Jo Ese: as a fellow doctoral student in Karlstad, a colleague at Østfold University College, a research partner and office roommate I am very much in debt to you for pulling this off.
I owe Bjørg Hellum many thanks for proofreading and correcting my use of the English language. It would have been futile to attempt to do this on my own.

Jan Ch. knocked on a door for me in Scotland and I was welcomed as a visiting scholar at the University of Strathclyde, Department of Human Resource Management for three months. Thanks to Professor Dennis Nickson and Professor Dora Scholarios for taking good care of me, and to all friendly PhD students I got to know while I was there. Many thanks to Michael Rose for being a reasonably priced landlord and a very good friend. I will never forget our weekend trip to the Isle of Lewis. It is not every day you get a private guided tour on the Outer Hebrides.

Thanks to my friends Terje Hatlen and Liv-Karin Henriksen, and my friends and neighbours Erling and Marina Hille. You have provided necessary balance when I have needed it the most. Knut Høiaas and the guys in the band have also been an oasis of joy in the midst of academic chaos and pressure. Thanks to Helge Bengtsson for our “discussion dinners” and for visiting me in Glasgow.

Many thanks to my son Alexander, my daughter Malin and my foster daughter Adele. You inspire me. My biggest thanks and love are reserved for my wife Lene who has never ceased to support me through this endeavour.

Mats Persson
Moss 29.09.2015
PART ONE – SETTING THE STAGE

In this part I focus on the background of the merger process. The part consists of five chapters each functioning as a way of placing the merger in context. After a short introductory chapter of the purpose, research question and theoretical approach, I continue with a chapter presenting the background for mergers in higher education. After that follows the methodology chapter describing how I have conducted my study. I continue with a chapter on the conceptual framework I developed and used in my analysis. I end this part with a chapter presenting the participants in the merger – the three university colleges.
Chapter 1 – Introduction

It is 08.03 in the morning 13 March 2012. An SMS from a colleague at Østfold University College ticks in. The message is short and to the point “Merger terminated. Read email from Rector!” I am in Karlstad, Sweden. I have just finished breakfast and am back in my hotel room preparing for a seminar at the university. I log on to the internet and read the e-mail from our Rector. It states:

To employees and students,
On the background of the consultative statements and an overall evaluation, the attempt at merger between the three university colleges has been terminated. While the consultative statements from Østfold expresses severe resistance to merge, the consultative statements from Buskerud and Vestfold support the merger as a long-term and strategic move. But several parties are sceptical towards a merger with Østfold due to the resistance that has been articulated here. The Ministry of Education and Research is informed about the outcome of the process. For further information I refer to the attached press release which will be distributed to the media today at 10.00 am.

/…/
Kind regards
Elin Nesje Vestli

My position as a PhD student at Østfold University College was linked to the merger and I was supposed to do research on the implementation phase of this merger between the three university colleges. All of a sudden my fear that the merger process would be terminated had come true. I leave the hotel to participate in the second day for PhD students at the Department of Working Life Science at Karlstad University. Everyone has prepared a paper to be commented and discussed. When it is my turn I explain my predicament and ask for advice on how to move on from here. The response is great. I get a lot of suggestions and pretty soon the foundation of a new research question develops – Why was the merger process terminated? What happened?
Let me tell you what *really* happened.¹

This thesis is actually not an attempt to explain what *really* happened. It is not an attempt to identify a specific set of factors that caused the merger process to be terminated. It is rather an attempt to shed light upon the way specific factors were used to construct meanings of what really happened when three Norwegian university colleges decided to terminate their merger process. These meanings depict a specific worldview and are therefore constructions of reality. Worldviews are constructed from a specific perspective and within a specific context and as such they are subject positions (Fairclough, 1989, p. 39). In this study the perspectives are constructions of support and opposition, and the context is an attempted merger between Buskerud University College, Vestfold University College and Østfold University College located in the south-east part of Norway.

So what this thesis is really about is to explore a specific event, namely an attempted merger, within a specific institutional field, namely higher education, from a specific perspective, namely the use of discursive practices. Discursive practice refers to the process of text production an interpretation (Fairclough, 1992, p. 4). Texts are any spoken or written product. Discursive practice is therefore to be understood as the way we use spoken or written language, and how it conditions and is conditioned by the context in which it is found.

I would like to begin by telling two stories. These stories are narrative constructions of what “really” happened in the merger process, and what the “real” reason was for the merger termination. I put “really” in quotation marks because the two stories are meta-stories based on my analysis of interviews and documents and thus describe the construction of support and opposition from a certain perspective. The stories reflect the essence of how discourses of support and opposition were constructed. Keep in mind the context of where these stories are told. They take place in the field of higher education and describe why a merger process between three university colleges was supported or opposed. The first story is based on a perspective where the merger was opposed:

¹ Comment from an employee at Østfold University College during informal conversation.
Why should we merge with them? They only want to merge with us to get their hands on our money to fund the development of their PhD programmes, which they need to become a university. We don’t want to be a university. Our job is to educate students in our region so they can become nurses, teachers and engineers. We provide vocational educations on bachelor level and some master’s programmes. That is what we do and that is what we’re supposed to do. PhD programmes will be funded at the expense of bachelor’s programmes and lower the quality of those programmes. And even if we wanted to merge, the merger process showed that we would become the losers. They would get everything and we would get nothing. We’re better off on our own.

What we can learn from this story is that what is opposed is both the idea of becoming a university and the means of how this university status is going to be achieved by developing PhD programmes. The story may not make much sense immediately, as a lot of background information is still missing. However, there is a logic line of reasoning connecting a set of elements that in sum make the basis of the discursive construction of meaning. As I will explore in this thesis there is a link between the idea of why the merger was initiated and the operationalisation of how the merger process was conducted and how the new merged organisation was going to be constructed. A binary opposition of the merger process becomes apparent in the second story that represents a totally opposite perspective. In this story the merger was supported:

Why didn’t they want to merge with us? We want to become a strategically positioned university in tomorrow’s education market, competing for students, staff and research funding. If we’re going to survive we need to join forces. We have spent a lot of time and money developing PhD programmes they will get access to for free once we’ve merged. The PhD programmes will belong to the whole organisation. It’s not about who’s getting what, it’s about what we can do together. Our job is to educate students in our region so they can become nurses, teachers and engineers. We need to provide the whole range of study programmes from bachelor to doctor in order to meet student demands. That is what we do and that is what we’re supposed to do. PhD programmes will improve quality on all levels and strengthen the bachelor’s programmes. The merger is not about winners and losers. It’s about standing together in a globalised world where only the best survive. We’re better off together.

2 The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms defines a binary opposition as "the principle of contrast between two mutually exclusive terms". In this thesis these are support and opposition.
Notice how certain parts of these stories share a common ground. In both stories the interest of the student is in focus. At the same time the idea to merge to achieve university status is not shared. Neither is the development of PhD programmes. The stories cannot be labelled “true” or “false”. What the “right” story was depended on perspective. Therefore it would be futile for me to try to explain what “really” happened. What I can do is to try to explain the mechanisms behind the discursive constructions conditioning the two different worldviews. By doing that I can also analyse what conditioned the merger process to be terminated. A relevant question at this point is what the purpose of studying constructions of support and opposition in an attempted higher education merger would be?

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study is twofold. Firstly, I aim to describe and understand the two discourses of support and opposition in the process of an attempted merger. Secondly, I aim to explain change in discursive practices. In this case change from support to opposition. This means that it is discursive practices I take interest in and how “hegemonies within particular organisations and institutions and at a societal level are produced, reproduced, contested and transformed in discourse” (Fairclough, 1992, pp. 9-10). Now, that would be the purpose of the study. However, an equally important question is why I have this purpose.

There are three reasons why I find the purpose of this study important. Firstly, studies in the field of mergers normally focus on the phase after a decision to merge has been made (Vaara, 2002). Research on this post-merger phase usually focuses on why a merger was a success or why it was not (Skodvin, 1999). Neglecting the phase leading up to the decision to merge (or not) in existing research seems strange since a substantial part of the merger and acquisition literature emphasises the importance of the pre-merger phase (Banal-Estañol & Seldeslachts, 2011; Marks & Mirvis, 2010, p. 44), and “the time spent on preparation, negotiation and anchoring is crucial for a successful merger outcome, regardless of the ways in which ‘success’ is defined” (Pinheiro, Geschwind & Aarevaara, in press-a, p. 4). This study adds to an under-investigated phase of mergers as its sole focus is on the pre-merger phase. In other words, what I find important to focus on is the pre-merger phase of a merger process.
Secondly, as mentioned above most research on mergers has been done on the post-merger phase that presupposes that a decision to merge has been made. As a consequence, research on attempted mergers is scarce. There is much to learn from so called failed change initiatives as they make up for a rich understanding of organisational change (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2008, p. 202). As this study focuses on an attempted merger it adds to the understanding of why merger initiatives may not end up with a decision to merge. In other words, what I find important to focus on is the attempt of a merger.

Thirdly, research on mergers and acquisitions usually focuses on factors affecting the decision to merge or the outcome of a merger (Wan & Peterson, 2007). Less research has been done from a discourse perspective where focus lies on the process and the construction of meaning. By taking a discourse approach this study adds to the understanding of how discourses of support and opposition are constructed and transformed. This knowledge will add to the understanding why some merger initiatives are never implemented. In other words, what I find important to focus on is the theoretical and methodological approach of discourse.

Of course there have been studies covering attempted mergers and the pre-merger phase, and studies focusing on discourse. For example, Drowley, Lewis, and Brooks (2013) took a discursive approach on the merger of two higher education institutions in Wales. However, they focused on the post-merger phase. Choi and Brommels (2009) focused on the pre-merger phase but not from a discourse perspective, and although the context was public sector, they studied a hospital merger and not higher education. What we do not find in the literature are studies focusing on the pre-merger phase of attempted mergers in higher education taking a discursive approach.

Based on the purpose of this study and why I find it important, I constructed an overall research problem of how merger support and opposition are constructed, and what causes change from support to opposition. This research problem led to the development of the following three research questions concerning the merger process between the three university colleges of Buskerud, Vestfold, and Østfold:
1. How can the merger process be described and explained from a support perspective?
2. How can the merger process be described and explained from an opposition perspective?
3. How can the change from support to opposition be explained?

A discursive approach

Having established that this thesis is about the construction of support and opposition in an attempted merger I would like to elaborate a bit on what I mean by that. As I have already stated I am not interested in specifying factors that might influence the decision to merge. Some very good research has been done on that already, see for example Kyvik and Stensaker (2013). What I am interested in is how different factors were used discursively to create a dominant discourse position. In other words, I am interested in how one worldview differs from another and why both parties considered their worldview to be the right one. This is not to say that any worldview is relevant. I refrain from that sort of extreme relativism. I believe there are mechanisms operating in the construction of discursive positioning that are conditioned both by existing social structures and discursive practices.

What I am interested in is the construction of support and opposition and how interaction between support and opposition affected the decision to merge three organisations as “all discourses are socially constructed relative to the social positions people are in” (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 8). The theoretical framework and analytic approach I use in this thesis is based on Critical Discourse Analysis which focuses on the dialectical relationship between discourse and social structures, showing that discourse is not only socially constituted but also socially constitutive (Fairclough, 1989, p. 37, 1992, p. 64). I take departure in the assumption that “language is an irreducible part of social life, dialectally interconnected with other elements of social life, so that social analysis and research always has to take account of language” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 2). This is to say that to understand the construction of support and opposition we need to understand how discourse both constructs different worldviews at the same time as existing worldviews and non-discursive elements form the use of discourse.

Taking a discursive approach means I deliberately choose to exclude other approaches. One example of an alternative approach could be to look at the
outcome of the merger process as a result of different internal and external stakeholder interests (Stensaker, Persson, & Pinheiro, in press). Another alternative approach could be to take departure in the decision not to merge and study decision making and the relationship between talk, decisions and action based on decision theory (Brunsson, 2002; Weinblatt, 2012).

In this thesis I study an attempted merger. I define an attempted merger as a merger initiative that does not end up with a decision to merge. At some point between a decision to investigate the possibility for a merger is initiated and a formal decision to merge is made, something goes awry. I introduce two concepts that will help me in my analysis. They reflect two important traits of mergers as a merger consists of both an idea and an operationalisation of that idea. A merger is rooted in an idea of why one should merge. This idea is the merger’s raison d’être – the reason for the merger’s existence. Without it, there would be no merger.

In addition to a merger idea there is also operationalisation, meaning how the merger process is conducted and how the newly merged organisation is to be constructed. Idea and operationalisation are separated analytically as two different concepts. In reality they are intertwined and in everyday life they are not separated. I will explore in depth the why and how of a merger process, and how the process creates a foundation on which discourses of support and opposition can be constructed.

Taking a discursive approach I am interested in the narratives told by participants in the merger process and the documents produced during the merger process. This means I have to decide on the boundaries of the study. I need to decide on the starting point and the end point of the merger process. The end-point is already set– there was no merger. I choose to start from the day the merger was terminated and then work my way backwards. This means that the 13 March 2012 when the merger process was terminated represents the end of my study. What I intend to do is to try to untangle some of the intertwined threads that in the end led to this decision. I have chosen to do this by structuring my thesis as a timeline. My intention is to describe and explore what happened along the way and how that came to be.

I find setting the starting point much more difficult. No matter where I set it, it can be argued it is placed wrongly because I have excluded previous
conditioning events. This problem shows in a very clear way the difficulties of
taking the path of discourse analysis. Discourses shape and are shaped by
other discursive and non-discursive elements. They are always connected and
can only be separated analytically. For pragmatic reasons it would be
impossible to start with the beginning of time or at least the beginning of
higher education as we know it. What to include in my analysis and what to
leave to context has been a hurdle that has been hard to clear. As a result, I
have chosen my starting point to be the first formal report produced in the
merger process. A number of reports were produced through the merger
process, and I have chosen to focus on some and excluded others. By
interweaving analysis of reports with interviews I have constructed a story of
how support and opposition were constructed and transformed through the
different phases of the merger process.

Specific events occurring at specific points in time created alternative
discourses. Support and opposition therefore fluctuated with different
individuals, groups, faculties and organisations. When I describe how support
and opposition was constructed it is not to be seen in an instrumental way
where there was support first and then there was opposition, and then the
opposition took over and then the whole thing collapsed. This is, in fact, how
the merger process usually was described by employees at the three university
colleges. This is not as much a wrong description as it is an uninteresting one.
Support and opposition existed everywhere and at all times during the merger
process. It was not statically connected to certain individuals, groups, faculties
or university colleges. What I will try to untangle in this thesis is the
construction of support and opposition transcending individuals, groups,
faculties and organisations and the dynamics involved in the changes of
discursive formation that evolves around the event of a merger process.

**Demarcation**

As it happened, there was no merger. I therefore restrict this study to the pre-
merger phase focusing on the process leading up to the decision not to merge. I
am more interested in pre-merger outcomes than merger outcomes. This
means that I disregard other phases of mergers such as the implementation
and the consolidation phase.

Although there was no actual merger there was a merger *process*. Since the
process was cancelled it could be argued that there really was no “merger
process” or “pre-merger” phase. This argument is based on the assumption that the two terms presuppose that a merger in fact occurred. I am aware that others have defined the merger process as the period after a formal decision to merge has been made, lasting up until the establishing of the new legal entity (Skarpsno, Hov-Aanæs, Bøgh, & Spångberg, 2002, p. 10). This is what I refer to as the implementation phase in this thesis. I chose to use the term “merger process” and “pre-merger” phase for the following two reasons: Firstly, people involved in the process referred to the process as the “merger process”. Although opinions of what the pre-merger phase was really about differed – whether it was about deciding to merge or not, or if it was about finding the best way of organising the merged organisation – there was a joint understanding of the organisational change process as something to do with mergers, and not any other kind of organisational change. Therefore the merger process was very much real although the merger did not become a reality in the sense that it was implemented. It was real because it had real effects. The reality of the merger process must not be seen as dependent on the outcome (a merger), but rather as an entity on its own. Entities “make a difference” in their own right (Fleetwood, 2005, p. 199). A merger process is ideationally real because it has real effects. Secondly, using the term “pre-merger” phase distinctly separates that phase from other phases used in merger and acquisition literature. That phase is the focus of this thesis, and although it is the only phase in this particular case, it is still a phase.

In a merger there are countless processes and activities going on. In order to make this project manageable I chose to focus on just a few of these aspects. My focus has primarily been on academic ideas and organisation, analysing discourses for and against the merger based on academic ambition and allocation of resources. For example, I do not analyse administrators’ discourses, administrative issues or information-technology issues3.

Outline

I structure this thesis as a chronological order of events. In chapter 2 I review the literature on mergers in higher education. I also present two central discourses that condition mergers: the notion of higher education as a market, and the notion of academic drift. I end the chapter by giving an overview of the restructuring of Norwegian higher education. In chapter 3 I present the methods used in this thesis. In chapter 4 I present my conceptual framework

---

3 For those interested in higher education mergers from that perspective, see Landqvist (2012).
that consists of four conceptual pairs: support/opposition, idea/operationalisation, outwards/inwards and modern/traditional.

The subsequent chapters are organised as a play with a number of acts, each act focusing on different phases with prominent events and central arguments. In chapter 5 I present the case on which this study is based. I describe the three university colleges of Buskerud, Vestfold and Østfold that constituted the merger partners. I also describe how the project organisation was constructed and who took part in the process. An overall timeline of the pre-merger phase is presented. This chapter sets the stage for later chapters. In chapter 6 I describe and analyse the period up to March 2010. This is the first act where the first report was produced, which functioned as a base for deciding whether to continue the merger process or not. In chapter 7 I describe and analyse the period April 2010–November 2010. In this Act one of the merger partners hesitated to continue the process. I describe and analyse the report they produced in order to gain a better foundation for making a decision. In chapter 8 I describe and analyse the period December 2010–December 2011. This is Act three where the workgroup reports were produced. In this act it becomes clear that the outcome of the merger process is no longer certain. In chapter 9 I describe and analyse the period January 2012–March 2012 which is the act where the decision to terminate the merger was made. In the final chapter 10 I try to gather the threads and analyse the outcome of the process based on the two main discourses of support and opposition.
Chapter 2 – Mergers in higher education

Before we get started on the main part of this thesis I would like to give a short introduction to mergers in the higher education sector. After that I continue with a section on the education market and academic drift that have both laid the ground for the restructuring of higher education, including mergers. I end the chapter with an overview of the restructuring of the Norwegian non-university higher education sector as a backdrop to the merger initiatives we have seen in higher education in recent years. The purpose of this chapter is to present the context in which mergers in higher education occur.

Introduction

Over the last decades there have been significant changes in the higher education sector, and the Nordic higher education landscape “has undergone a profound transformation in recent years” (Pinheiro, Geschwind & Aarevaara, (in press-b, p. 8). Mergers as a way of restructuring higher education institutions have become increasingly more common (Kyvik & Stensaker, 2013, p. 1; Skodvin, 2014, p. 3). By joining forces two or more separate organisational entities seek advantages they could not achieve on their own. These mergers have received a great deal of scholarly attention (K. Harman & Meek, 2002, p. 1). A common definition of a merger in higher education is:

The combination of two or more separate institutions into a single new organizational entity, in which control rests with a single governing body and a single chief executive body, and whereby all assets, liabilities and responsibilities of the former institutions are transferred to the single new institution (Goedegebuure, 1992, p. 16).

This means that the old organisations cease to exist as independent units the moment the new merged university college is established (Norgård & Skodvin, 2002, p. 77), and the new organisation is established with a changed structure (Solstad, 2007, p. 14).

Higher education is mostly the responsibility of the public sector. However, most research on mergers and acquisitions has been done in the private sector,

---

4 I use the term higher education institutions as I see higher education as a social institution where "public colleges and universities by definition must preserve a broader range of social functions that include such essential educational legacies as the cultivation of citizenship, the preservation of cultural heritage(s), and the formation of individual character and habits of mind" (Gumport, 2000, p. 71).
and in a manufacturing context (Bringselius, 2008). A public sector higher education institution, which is a professional bureaucracy, differs from a private sector machine bureaucracy (Mintzberg, 1979, p. 351). Nevertheless, it has been assumed in merger and acquisition theory that conclusions drawn from private sector machine bureaucracies are valid in any context (Bringselius, 2008, p. 8). This way research in one organisational field can influence how research is undertaken in another, and rather different, organisational field.

Over the years various researchers have pointed out what it is that contributes to a merger’s success or failure (Skodvin, 1999) and what lessons are to be learned from mergers (Fielden & Markham, 1997). Also, guides have been developed to good practice on how to conduct a higher education merger (HEFCE, 2004). The vast majority of studies focus on the phase after the merger has been implemented (Van Straaten Theron & Dodd, 2011), but there are also examples of research focusing on the factors affecting the decision to merge (Kyvik & Stensaker, 2013). The perspectives of research in higher education mergers differ. Some take a strategic perspective (G. Harman & Harman, 2008; Rowley, 1997), while others focus on cultural (K. Harman, 2002; Locke, 2007) or identity (van Knippenberg, Martin, & Tyler, 2006) aspects. Even the questions whether mergers are always stressful (Cartwright, Tytherleigh, & Robertson, 2007) and if education is getting lost in mergers have been raised (Ursin, Aittola, Henderson, & Välimaa, 2010). Mergers in higher education have been studied in most parts of the world such as China (Wan & Peterson, 2007), South Africa (van Vuuren, Beelen, & de Jong, 2010), United Kingdom (Cartwright et al., 2007; G. Harman & Harman, 2008), Holland (Goedegebuure, 1992; Maassen, Moen, & Stensaker, 2011; van Knippenberg et al., 2006), Australia (Goedegebuure, 1992), Finland (Ursin et al., 2010), Canada (Eastman & Lang, 2001) and Norway (Kyvik, 2002; Kyvik & Stensaker, 2013; Maassen et al., 2011; Skodvin & Stensaker, 1998).

Goedegebuure (1992, p. 23) suggests a typology of mergers using the dimensions of academic fields and product. Academic fields are the disciplines or courses offered by the higher education institution, for example teacher training, engineering and social sciences. There are big differences between courses offered in the university and the non-university sector as well as within each sector. The other dimension is the “product”, which in the case of higher education institutions is limited to education and research. Some higher
education institutions are more education focused, while others are more focused on research. These dimensions can be translated into a typology of four types of mergers (Goedegebuure, 1992, pp. 23-24) described in Figure 2.1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Field</th>
<th>Similar</th>
<th>Different</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Similar</td>
<td>Horizontal</td>
<td>Vertical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different</td>
<td>Diversification</td>
<td>Conglomerate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 2.1. A typology for higher education mergers (Source: Goedegebuure, 1992 p. 24).*

A *horizontal* merger is a merger between institutions that operate in similar academic fields and are oriented towards a similar type of product. This could be a merger between two university colleges with a similar range of educations offered and equally focused on either research or teaching.

A *vertical* merger is a merger between institutions that operate in similar academic fields and are oriented towards a different type of product. This could for example be a merger between two university colleges where the study programmes offered are similar but where one is focused on research and PhD educations, and the other more focused on teaching and lower level study programmes. The merger process studied in this thesis can be described as a vertical merger as Buskerud and Vestfold were more research focused than Østfold.

A *diversification* merger is a merger between institutions that operate in different academic fields and are oriented towards a similar type of product. A merger between a research focused university college and a university could be an example of a diversification merger. Both are focused on the product of research but differ in study programmes offered.

A *conglomerate* merger is a merger between institutions that operate in different academic fields and are oriented towards a different type of product.
A merger between a vocation-oriented university college and a research-oriented university would be a typical example of a conglomerate merger.

Other values can be used to separate the different dimensions. Eastman and Lang (2001, p. 107) suggest that product orientation reflects types of programmes offered rather than focusing on education or research. A vertical merger, for example, could be between two higher education institutions offering the same type of education – one at undergraduate level and the other at graduate level. Another issue is to draw the line at similarity of academic fields, for instance separating the university sector from the non-university sector defining them as operating in different academic fields. Traditionally, universities offer academically oriented education while university colleges offer professional- and vocational-oriented education. Another way would be to look at the specific courses offered. Most university colleges offer the same basic study programmes of health/nurse training, teacher education, engineering and a range of social sciences and humanities. This differs from more specialised higher education institutions of for example music or arts where there can be different academic fields within a sector.

The university sector has traditionally focused more on research and the non-university sector has focused more on education. Due to academic and vocational drift this separation is under pressure and the line between the two sectors is getting blurred. This reflects product orientation as the non-university sector is becoming increasingly more focused on both PhD education and research. A merger between a university college with a focus on developing PhDs and becoming a university, and a university college with no such ambitions could be classified as a vertical merger. They offer study programmes similar enough to be in the same academic field but are oriented towards different types of product.

A merger can be divided into several phases (Buono & Bowditch, 1989, p. 89; Eastman & Lang, 2001, pp. 102-103; Marks & Mirvis, 1998, p. 28). The first phase (pre-merger phase) starts when the intention of a merger is announced, and lasts until a formal decision to merge has been made. This phase consists of negotiations, reports and a search for common ground and is frequently characterised by uncertainty (Seo & Hill, 2005, p. 435). In the next phase change is implemented (implementation phase). This phase starts when a formal decision to merge has been made and lasts until the new organisation is
established. The phase ends with the termination of the old organisations as independent legal units and the new merged organisation is a fact. The last phase (post-merger phase) is the consolidation phase after the merger has been concluded. It continues until the merged organisation has found its new form, which can sometimes take up to ten years (Skodvin, 1999, p. 70).

So, why do higher education institutions decide to merge? According to Eastman and Lang (2001, p. 12) merger initiatives are based on a perceived necessity. If adequate financial, physical and human resources were available, a merger would presumably not be undertaken. Skodvin (1999, p. 68) suggests that a “natural explanation is that external instigators and/or participants generally think that it is more advantageous than disadvantageous” and that the most frequent motive is “the wish to achieve administrative, economic and academic benefits”. Academic benefits are described by Skodvin (1999, p. 69) as 1) eliminating duplicate programmes, 2) increasing academic integration and collaboration, e.g. creating new multi- and interdisciplinary fields, and 3) diversifying academic profiles, e.g. a merger between institutions that complement each other, strengthening the new institution’s position in the national and international higher education market.

Hinfelaar (2012, p. 45) classifies the driving forces to merge into two broad categories of “push factors, arising from external pressures which generate defence mechanisms; or pull factors which represent attractive options to organisations”. There is always a form of assumed gain driving the urge to merge. Pressure to achieve this gain can originate from the state or government in the form of the Ministry of Education pushing for more efficiency and higher quality. It can also originate from the institutions themselves seeing merger as an opportunity to gain a better strategic position in the education market. Another pull factor is the possibility to achieve economy of scale. Economy of scale in higher education is based on an idea that large institutions spend less money per full time equivalent students than small institutions (Patterson, 2000, p. 259).

However, although economy of scale is one driver for merger (Skodvin, 1999, p. 69) it has been proven difficult to achieve, so the rationale behind any merger should be strategic and academic and not predicted upon the prospects of cost savings (Fielden & Markham, 1997, p. 2). Pfeffer and Salancik (2003, p. 135) argue that “[w]hile cost reductions do occur as firms increase in size from
being quite small to moderate size, such economies of scale are achieved at relatively small firm sizes and do not increase thereafter with further growth”. Exactly what this means in actual size is not explained but “there is some evidence that significant economies of scale do not begin until enrolment reaches about 20,000” (Layard, as cited in Eastman & Lang, 2001, p. 196). Specifying the number of students where economy of scale occurs can be hazardous as “the actual strategic costs and benefits can be very difficult to quantify” (Patterson, 2000, p. 268), as well as “the common assumption that economies of scale can be realised through merger is often incorrect” (Eastman & Lang, 2001, p. 203).

There is a whole range of structural, cultural and inter-group factors that can explain the outcome of a merger (Kyvik & Stensaker, 2013). The size of the partners involved in the merger matters, the larger the difference in size, the greater the possibility that the merger will be successful (Kyvik & Stensaker, 2013; Skodvin, 1999). Geographical proximity also influences whether a merger is successful where distance is an obstacle (Norgård & Skodvin, 2002). Short distances between the merger partners increase the possibility of success (Kyvik & Stensaker, 2013; Skodvin, 1999). Differences in academic profiles in the form of study programmes make complementarity a success factor (Kyvik & Stensaker, 2013; Skodvin, 1999).

A study of Norwegian higher education merger initiatives also showed that the number of merger partners played a significant part. No merger initiative involving as many as three institutions ended up with a decision to merge (Kyvik & Stensaker, 2013).

Another issue that has been pointed out is that voluntary mergers stand a better chance of success than forced mergers (Skodvin, 1999, p. 70) because “it is possible to achieve a substantial degree of staff involvement in negotiations and implementation, leading usually to a strong sense of ownership” (G. Harman & Harman, 2003, pp. 31-32). However, it could be argued that there is really no such thing as a voluntary merger as:

Mergers always is an offensive or defensive action in response to certain environmental developments, ranging from specific government initiatives to weavings of the ‘invisible hand’ of the market (Goedegebuure, 1992, p. 22)
Whether a merger is considered voluntary or forced can depend on subject position. For those supporting it, it can be perceived as voluntary. At the same time it can be perceived as forced by those opposing it.

How a merger is managed also influences the outcome as “a successful merger is above all characterised by visible and strong management” (Skodvin, 1999, p. 77), where “it is essential to the success of a merger that the institution has a goal, vision or mission statement which is shared by all” (Skodvin, 2014, p. 13). Both a shared vision of merger goals and strong leadership in the merger process is therefore crucial (G. Harman & Harman, 2003; HEFCE, 2004). Cultural differences is another aspect that influences how successful a merger is (Enehaug & Thune, 2007; Norgård & Skodvin, 2002), and these cultural issues need to be managed by good leadership (K. Harman, 2002).

When success is discussed in the merger literature it is usually from the perspective of whether goals have been reached or synergies have been made. This presupposes a merger has been made, and the outcome of the post-merger phase is often measured in monetary terms (Banal-Estañol & Seldeslachts, 2011).

When comparing sectors, Lang (2003) suggests that mergers in the higher education sector have a success rate of 80 per cent, compared to the for-profit sector with a success rate of 40 per cent. Rowley (1997) reported a success rate of 90 per cent in higher education mergers. This is considerably higher than mergers in the industry which Smith (2002) found to have a median success rate of 33 per cent. Mergers in the higher education sector seem to have a better “track-record” than in the for-profit sector. However, we should not be too carried away as Enehaug and Thune (2007) suggest that 80 per cent of mergers do not reach their economic or strategic goals, mainly due to cultural issues. Although the numbers vary considerably in different studies, it seems like “mergers do not automatically lead to either an increase in profitability, efficiency or productivity” (Goedegebuure, 1992, p. 29).

Another aspect is that it does not seem that we learn from our mistakes. The success rate for mergers has not improved over the last 30 years (Cartwright & Schoenberg, 2006). Based on existing merger literature it becomes clear that undertaking a merger is risky business. The chance of failure is high. An alternative way of defining whether a merger has been successful or not is to
compare the number of merger initiatives with the number of actual mergers. Not all merger initiatives lead to a merger (Kyvik & Stensaker, 2013) and can be described as a merger attempt. From this perspective an unsuccessful merger or a merger failure can be defined as a merger attempt.

Mergers in higher education have been studied from a variety of perspectives and in many countries. I will continue this chapter by addressing two aspects that condition mergers. The first is the education market where higher education institutions compete for resources like staff, students, research funding and reputation. The market metaphor is based on an ideology of neoliberalism. A key word in this setting is *efficiency*. The second is academic drift where non-university higher education institutions become more like universities. The drift metaphor is based on an ideology of the knowledge-society in which “knowledge is the primary driver of national and international economic and social prosperity” (Henkel, 2007, p. 89), and where research holds higher status than education. A key word in this setting is *status*. The status of research is a powerful driving force changing the landscape of higher education. A third key word is *quality*, which is used both in the discourse of education market and that of academic drift. After describing the education market and academic drift I turn to the restructuring of the higher education sector in Norway as it has been conditioned by both of these two ideologies.

**Education market**

In a market "buyers and sellers of goods and services are brought together” (Jongbloed, 2003, p. 111). The view that “education is simply another market commodity has become normalised in policy and public discourse” (Lynch, 2006, p. 1). In other words, it has become widely accepted that higher education institutions operate in a competitive global market (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Eastman & Lang, 2001; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Välimaa, Aittola, & Ursin, 2014), where “marketisation is a reality that academics have to live with” (Furedi, 2011, p. 1) and “one prominent manifestation of the external pressures towards market orientation has been the push for structural changes in higher education” (Ylijoki, 2014, p. 56). One type of structural change is that of mergers. Mergers are described as a necessary consequence in a changing higher education landscape and Goedegebuure (2011, p. 16) argues that:
Whether or not national governments force market-type coordination mechanisms on their tertiary education systems, a global competition for the best and brightest already operates, commonly labelled ‘the war for talent’. Combined with increasing student mobility and the de-nationalising and collaborate nature of today’s research enterprise, this indeed implies that tertiary education, at least in part, has moved to the global playing field, where competition reigns supreme. This will force those playing or wanting to play in that game to strategically position themselves, which for many will imply a structural re-arrangement through either merger or strategic partnership.

From this perspective, in the marketisation of the universities (Fairclough, 1993) higher education institutions become more like businesses than churches (Albert & Whetten, 1985). However, universities are not corporations. According to Engwall (2008) universities differ from business corporations in at least four characteristics. Universities are much older than corporations. They stem from the Middle Ages whereas corporations originate from the 19th century. Where the primary goal of universities is reputation, the primary goal for corporations is profit. Universities are owned by trustees whereas corporations are owned by shareholders. Finally, corporations are organised as hierarchies with extensive authority allocated to executives whereas universities are professional organisations with a high level of authority allocated to faculty members.

Still, the consequences of an education market affect both students and staff. Students are seen as consumers shopping for education. They seek to “have a degree” rather than “be learners” (Molesworth, Nixon, & Scullion, 2009, p. 277). Education becomes a necessary commodity used to get access to a specific work-position rather than develop insight and critical thinking (Alvesson, 2013, p. 74). From a student perspective having a degree is more important than the content of an education. From a university or university college perspective throughput in the sense of the number of graduated students becomes a central financial variable, and as such potentially threatens the quality of education. (Gumport, 2000, p. 67) warns us that:

While public universities and colleges have increasingly come to rely on market discourse and managerial approaches in order to demonstrate responsiveness to economic exigencies, they may end up losing legitimacy as they move away from their historical character, functions, and accumulated heritage as educational institutions.
That academic staff have had their identity as academics challenged by a managerial discourse viewing higher education as a market has not gone unchallenged (Anderson, 2008). The introduction of managerialism into the higher education sector has been criticised, arguing that it will ultimately make the sector less effective, less purposeful, unproductive and weaker (By, Diefenbach, & Klarner, 2008). When organisational values change from academic ideology to business ideology, the fit between organisational and personal values are challenged. If there is congruence between the ideologies and values of the academics and a discourse of corporate managerialism, we can talk about “academic managers”. In the absence of such congruence we can talk about “managed academics” (Winter, 2009). Whether one identifies with a market discourse or not it poses potential problems for higher education institutions. Mergers are thus part of a wider market discourse affecting identities on both the individual and organisational level.

In a globalised education market a merger is a way of becoming a “world class” higher education institution (Goedegebuure, 2011). Strategic positioning is perceived to be important in the competition for reputation, staff and students, and ranking in an international environment becomes crucial for survival. There are different ways of doing this but there are two main strategies. Firstly, by becoming academically stronger through quality of education and research, and secondly, by reducing costs through economy of scale (Skodvin, 1999).

What makes a merger in higher education “strategic” is the “aim of enhancing competitive advantage or mutual growth” to reach a position as a top world class university (G. Harman & Harman, 2008, pp. 99-100). In any case, “strategic” means a positioning in an education market that operates under the same mechanisms as other markets. The idea of strategic positioning is closely related to an ideology of neoliberalism where higher education is ideally constructed like the private sector (Levidow, 2002). Mergers are therefore a way of responding to market mechanisms in order to survive the competition. Higher education institutions have always competed with each other, and have always fought for research resources. What is new is the idea of seeing students as customers and higher education institutions as service providers (Furedi, 2011).

In the next section I present the other primary driver for mergers in the higher education sector. Where education market can explain mergers in terms of
strategic positioning, marginalisation, competition and survival – academic drift is the tendency for non-university higher education institutions to become more like universities. In this case mergers are explained as the need to build robust research groups, international funding and provide research-based education. Academic drift is based on a will to achieve higher status in the higher education hierarchy. It is closely linked to the discourse of education market as positioning in the higher education hierarchy also means positioning in the education market.

**Academic drift**

The concept of academic drift is often associated with the work of Burgess and Pratt who coined the term in 1972 where Burgess described a process:

> which my colleague John Pratt and I have called “academic drift”. For over 100 years now it has been assumed that the achievement of status for an individual institution means moving out of the technical college tradition and into the academic one (Burgess, 1972, p. 13).

Burgess and Pratt focused on English polytechnics but the concept of academic drift is applicable to other countries as well (Neave, 1979, p. 144). The reason for academic drift is related to status. The hierarchy in higher education consists of a “pecking order” (McConnell, 1962) where older, “classic” research universities have higher status than more recently established universities and university colleges. Academic drift can be seen as a result of wanting to move up in the pecking order. The effect of academic drift is that universities and university colleges are growing more alike (Morphew & Huisman, 2002, p. 492). A merger in order to achieve university status is a strategic move to move up in the pecking order.

The cause of status difference between universities and university colleges has its roots in how we value knowledge. There is a very strong tradition in Western countries to value knowledge “of the mind” over knowledge “of the hand” and theory over practice (Harwood, 2010, p. 422). Thus scientific knowledge is considered more prestigious than practical knowledge. The non-university sector is primarily based on lower level vocational education where practical knowledge in a specific profession historically has been the main goal.
Morphew and Huisman (2002) suggest the use of institutional theory to better understand patterns of academic drift. They do so by using the concept of “isomorphism in organisational fields” introduced by DiMaggio and Powell (1983). Isomorphism is a tendency for organisations to grow more similar over time. An organisational field is a set of organisations that constitutes a recognised area of institutional life, including key suppliers, resource and product consumers, and regulatory agencies (Morphew & Huisman, 2002, p. 496). In this case the higher education sector is considered an organisational field. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) describe three forms of isomorphism.

Coercive isomorphism occurs when organisations become more like other organisations as a result of external pressure, for example the implementation of a specific policy. An example would be when policy makers demand education to be research-based. That forces higher education institutions to focus more on research and as a consequence university colleges become more like universities. Mimetic isomorphism occurs when organisations become more like other organisations as a result of uncertainty. By becoming more like other organisations the level of uncertainty is reduced. There is mimetic isomorphism when there is uncertainty whether university colleges will survive in the education market. Fear of being marginalised drives them to be more research focused and thereby more like universities. Normative isomorphism occurs when organisations become more like other organisations as a result of academisation. There is normative isomorphism when university colleges only hire new faculty members with a doctoral degree. By replacing non-PhD-holding staff with candidates holding a PhD research focus increases and as consequence there is academic drift. These three forms of isomorphism contribute to academic drift and a change in higher education structure from a binary system separating the non-university sector from the university sector, to a unified system.

Neave (1979) distinguishes between three types of drift – policy drift, institutional drift and academic drift. Policy drift is seen as failure in governmental decision-making. By communicating imprecise and ambiguous objectives for the non-university sector interpretation of objectives is left to the sector itself. Policy drift is found on the governmental level influencing individual institutions to drift. Institutional drift involves “the departure by an institution from publicly stated and agreed objectives ascribed to it by an
authoritative government agency” (Neave, 1979, p. 151). Academic drift is seen as one aspect of institutional drift and is described as:

The consequence of faulty interpretation by the institution, resulting in a different series of priorities and weighting attached to the type of study available: let us say, academic and theoretical work as opposed to the development of the vocational side (Neave, 1979, p. 145).

Whether academic drift is considered a good or a bad thing depends on perspective. Neave (1979) described it as a “disease” (p. 143) and an “infantile malady” (p. 153) because it does not correspond to the grounds on which the non-university sector was established. The establishment of a non-university sector focusing on vocational educations in the regions is at odds with academic drift. Wanting to become more like universities therefore defies the grounds on which the non-university sector was established. However, more recent government policy of “research-based education” and structures where research is financially premiered has not only legitimised but also encouraged academic drift. There is substantial pressure from the Ministry of Education on university colleges to produce more research. Regardless if one sees academic drift as a positive or negative thing there has been academic drift in the Norwegian non-university higher education sector right from the establishing of District Colleges in 1969. Neave (1979, p. 153) argues that by 1976 studies showed that “their subsequent development no longer corresponded with the intentions either from their founding fathers or of the originating legislation”. Academic drift is therefore not something that has started in recent years. Rather it has been a tendency since the non-university sector was established.

There are two types of manifestations of academic drift. The first is the pressure on existing education staff to increase research competence and achieve formal scientific degrees. This drift puts pressure on an existing “teacher” identity pushing towards a “researcher” identity. The second is the policy of employment. In the 1970s difficulties for academics to find a job led to the influx of university staff into the District Colleges (Neave, 1979, p. 156). This was an unintended consequence of the labour market but nevertheless led to academic drift. More recently there has been an active employment policy where candidates without a doctoral degree are seldom considered for permanent positions. This policy leads to a more research focused staff and an increase in academic drift.
One question is whether or not academic drift is inevitable. According to Neave it is. He claims that “the academic profession is possessed of a coherent set of values and attitudes which stand almost diametrically opposed to the objectives attributed to District Colleges” (Neave, 1979, p. 157). In other words, you cannot construct a higher education sector without considering the values attached to the higher education sector. The development of a non-university sector as a parallel to the university sector, but still within the frame of the higher education sector is therefore doomed to fail; the reason for this being that the values and beliefs of higher education are based upon a concept of personal autonomy, distinguished by their grounding in research, the need for academics to work at the cutting edge of their field, and staff quality being judged by scholarly performance. Even if the non-university sector has different objectives than the university sector “the common ideology which identifies academia is still a remarkably powerful force” (Neave, 1979, p. 158).

Harwood (2010), on the other hand, holds a different view. He argues that academic drift is not inevitable at all. Drift can be prevented by geographically locating colleges in an area of industrial interest, for example locating engineering colleges near industrial areas. Drift can also be discouraged by appropriate rules of funding, for example by recognising other aspects of contribution than research and published articles. However, in a study of 4481 American higher education institutions Fairweather (1995) found that faculty salaries were primarily based on research and publishing productivity regardless whether it was a college with primary focus on teaching or a university with a stronger focus on research. A third way of preventing academic drift would be to restructure the higher education system itself. Here Harwood (2010, p. 422) suggests it is possible to “place each of the technical sciences in specialised colleges which contained posts or departments dedicated to the relevant basic subjects”. By making “practice” the main area, the traditional hierarchy where theory holds higher status than practice would be altered. Academic drift can be discouraged by governmental policy. But if:

Governments want to preserve the kind of institutional diversity which industry is calling for, they must dismantle the stratification of higher education so that institutions can be different but still equal. Allowing formal difference of status to persist is asking for trouble (Harwood, 2010, p. 424).
Where Neave argues that academic drift is inevitable due to academic values, Harwood argues that academic drift can be discouraged through active governmental policy and change of structure.

The substantial increase in master’s degrees over the last years and the increasing number of PhD programmes in the non-university sector is a visible evidence of academic drift. Academic drift puts pressure on the binary system that separates the university sector from the non-university sector. In some countries like the United Kingdom a unified system has replaced the binary system (Kyvik, 2004). In Norway the binary system has not yet been discontinued but is under pressure. It is sometimes referred to as a “flexible and transparent binary system” (Skodvin, 2014, p. 4) because if non-university higher education institutions fulfil certain national academic standards and criteria they can achieve university status.

Undertaking research demands resources. There is a need for a sufficient number of researchers within a specific field to form research groups. There is also a need for skills in how to write grant applications in order to set up research projects. Developing and operating PhD programmes also demands vast resources both in the number of PhD students and professors. Academic drift conditions mergers as small university colleges do not have the resources to pursue these interests. In a larger and more “robust” institution research has better conditions. In the next and last section I discuss the development and restructuring of the Norwegian non-university higher education sector.

Over the years changes have been conditioned both by ideologies of education market and academic drift.

The restructuring of the Norwegian non-university higher education sector

In the period after World War II the Norwegian higher education sector was characterised by a few comprehensive universities alongside a relatively large number of vocational schools and colleges spread throughout the country. In the 1960s student numbers started to increase and as a response new higher education institutions were established outside the universities. The main purpose of the non-university sector was to “offer a wide spectrum of vocationally oriented education, either to qualify for a specific occupation or to prepare for a profession” (Skodvin, 1997, p. 318), and they were “directed towards the needs of the industry” (Kyvik, 2004, p. 397).
In addition, the development of a non-university sector had a regional policy function; it was a way of bringing education into the regions. Offering education closer to where people lived not only made education more accessible, it also created new jobs. It was a question of regional politics as an answer to the demand for mass higher education. In addition to these vocational-oriented colleges, district colleges started to be established in the early 1970s. They served the purpose of relieving the universities with regard to undergraduate-level studies as well as offering shorter vocationally oriented education. The development of a dual system in higher education was therefore based on an increase in students seeking higher education and a concern whether existing universities could absorb the growth in student numbers. In addition, distributed district colleges were believed to strengthen regional economies (Kyvik, 2004, pp. 394-395).

The development of the non-university sector was based on four main ideas. The first idea was to meet the demands for non-university courses. The change from elite to mass education meant primarily an increase in vocationally oriented education. Universities could not and would not meet these demands. This brings us to the second idea, which was the development of a non-university sector separate from the universities but still within the higher education system. The third idea was that non-university higher education institutions would be located in the regions. This would meet regional demands for a skilled workforce and in addition create regional jobs. The fourth idea was to improve international competitiveness by creating a higher educated workforce. In Norway this was also a way of bringing together various specialised institutions like those for teacher training, nursing, and engineering.

The establishment of a large number of new colleges in the 1970s and 1980s eventually led to the understanding by the government that the geographical decentralisation had gone too far and the number of non-university higher education institutions was too high. By 1990, the sector encompassed 127 public higher education institutions, serving a population of about 4.2 million inhabitants. In addition, 22 private institutions were receiving government support. The number of higher education institutions was considered too high by the government to administrate. By the end of the 1980s a Royal Commission was set up to evaluate the goals, organisation and priorities of
higher education and research, and in 1988 the commission recommended to reduce the number of institutions by half (NOU 2008:3, 2008, p. 28).

As a result of the commission’s recommendations, in 1994, 98 vocationally oriented colleges were merged into 26 multidisciplinary state colleges. The reform encompassed 27 colleges of health education, 25 colleges of teacher education, 15 colleges of engineering and 3 colleges of social work as well as 14 district colleges and 14 other small, specialised colleges. The merger resulted in the establishment of a binary system separating the university sector from the non-university sector. The purpose of the reorganisation was to:

Enhance the quality of administrative functions and academic work through the creation of larger administrative and academic units. To break down barriers between the former colleges, and to develop new and broader study programmes (Kyvik, 2004, p. 401).

The 1994 forced merger marked a shift from a specialised model with nursing colleges, teacher colleges, engineering colleges and district colleges operating as autonomous institutions, into a binary model that established a more uniform non-university sector as an alternative to the universities. The principal objective of the binary system was that the colleges should provide education, but not research or research training. The universities should also be responsible for traditional academic studies, while the colleges were to focus on the more practical subjects (Kyvik, 2004, p. 399). The binary system meant that the universities should be responsible for basic research, graduate education and research training. The colleges on their part should provide a variety of short-cycled professional and vocational educations. They should also offer some university programmes for undergraduate education. In addition they could offer graduate education within certain fields where the universities did not offer similar programmes (Kyvik, 2002, p. 57). Kyvik (2002) also suggests that an unofficial aim of the 1994 merger reform was to prevent two regional colleges from becoming universities.

What happened over the next decade was that the difference between the two sectors decreased. In 1995, the university academic rank system was introduced in the university colleges and in 1996 the state colleges were included under the same act as the universities. According to the Act relating to universities and university colleges:
The colleges should undertake research, preferably connected to practice within specific fields, or to problems particularly relevant to their region (Kyvik, 2002, p. 57).

The university colleges were in other words now also expected to undertake research. But in contrast to the basic research done at the universities, the university colleges should focus on applied research within specific fields and relevant to their region. In addition, teaching should now be research-based. Since 1999, the university colleges have had the possibility to apply for accreditation of PhD-programmes provided some specific criteria are fulfilled. This inspired some university colleges to work towards university status. In 2004, the government decided that university colleges that fulfilled certain minimum standards could apply for accreditation to full university status. Offering master's degrees in at least five different areas and PhDs in at least four different fields were the most important requirements. As a consequence university colleges with university ambitions now saw the possibility to become full-fledged universities. In 2005 the University of Stavanger was established followed by the University of Agder in 2007. The University of Nordland was the last of the three “new” universities, achieving university status in 2011. From the turn of the millennium to 2013, 14 voluntary merger attempts involving a total of 26 institutions have been initiated. Most of them have taken place after the 2004 reform (Kyvik & Stensaker, 2013, p. 7). These merger attempts include initiatives between university colleges, between “old” universities and university colleges, and between “new” universities and university colleges. Of the 14 merger initiatives 12 have led to further negotiations. Four of those resulted in a merger while seven were terminated. One was still in progress by the time this study finished (Kyvik & Stensaker, 2013, p. 13).

In 2008 the governmental report “A Comprehensive View” (NOU 2008:3, 2008) concluded that there were too many higher education institutions in Norway and that they should be merged into eight to ten regional universities. The report was produced by the Stjernø commission which was a royal commission appointed by the Ministry of Education to investigate and recommend alternatives for restructuring the Norwegian higher education sector. The Stjernø report concluded that the level of quality in Norwegian higher education was not satisfying. It was pointed out that many small
academic organisations provided identical study programmes. In addition to the problem that they were competing with each other instead of collaborating, they were too small and therefore vulnerable. In order to increase quality the Stjernø commission proposed a merger of all universities and university colleges in the higher education sector into eight or ten major universities.

Although there was governmental support for the diagnosis set by the Stjernø commission, there was no support for the medicine of forced mergers. Instead the government at the time established the SAK strategy (cooperation, division of labour and consolidation). The criteria for this strategy were quality, robustness and efficiency (Skodvin, 2014, p. 3). The SAK strategy was based on voluntary mergers as opposed to centrally structured forced reforms. The aim of the SAK strategy was to create robust academic organisations as well as improving the quality of education and research. The SAK strategy was backed by economic incentives operating as a “carrot”. At the same time the “stick” was an implied threat of forced mergers if the higher education institutions did not follow governmental policy. Political pressure was therefore high to initiate merger processes, even though they were voluntary. What we have seen in the last years is an increase in merger initiatives. This is a consequence of ideologies of the education market and academic drift represented in governmental restructuring of the higher education sector.

Summary

In this chapter I have given an overview of mergers in higher education. I have further discussed how discourses of education market and academic drift condition merger initiatives. Finally, I have discussed the restructuring of higher education in Norway. Mergers in the higher education sector can be seen as manifest consequences of mechanisms relating to market and academic drift. They are conditioned by private sector structures (like for examples financial structures) and a private sector discourse (like for example the assumption that competition will always benefit the customer). This restructuring is therefore conditioned both by the ideology of an education market and by academic drift resulting in a number of merger initiatives in recent years. However, the number of merger attempts being terminated is high. In the next chapter I will describe the methodology I used to analyse one of these “failed” mergers.
Chapter 3 – Methodology

A research process is a rather chaotic process. The final result does not in any way reflect the complexity, tours, and detours that are involved when conducting research. A thesis is an illusion of stringency, describing a journey from A to B as a sequential process. Nothing could be further from the truth. Still, doing research is all about working in a systematic and accurate way. In this chapter I will describe the choices I have made when conducting this research project and argue why I have made those choices. I will also describe how I have conducted my analysis. One important aspect of a methodology chapter is to explain the chosen research design. A research design is:

*An action plan for getting from here to there, where here may be defined as the initial set of questions to be answered, and there is some set of conclusions (answers) about these questions (Yin, 1994, p. 19, italics in original).*

I start this chapter by describing my preferred choice of methods. After that I present the background of the project. I continue with a presentation of my data sampling methods and end the chapter with a description of how I analysed my empirical data. Before I start I would like to repeat my research questions to remind the reader what I investigate in this study:

1. *How can the merger process be described and explained from a support perspective?*
2. *How can the merger process be described and explained from an opposition perspective?*
3. *How can the change from support to opposition be explained?*

**Methods**

In this research project I take a qualitative approach. What we study in qualitative research is not an objective reality independent of people living in it. What is being investigated is rather “people’s constructions of reality – how they understand the world” (Merriam, 2009, p. 214). This means I am interested in how a certain phenomenon is described and understood from a specific perspective. What I want to get a grip on is peoples’ lived experiences. I am interested in how meaning is constructed through discourse. My aim is to describe and analyse how discourses of support and opposition are constructed and how these discourses might change their hegemonic position in a given
context. These questions make case study a relevant method. A case study is preferred when:

A “how” or “why” question is being asked about a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control (Yin, 1994, p. 9)

My research focus is on how support and opposition were described and explained in the merger process, and why the opposition discourse became the dominant discourse in one of the university colleges. In addition to the “how” and “why” questions I had little control of the events, which in this case were the contemporary phenomenon of a merger process between three university colleges in Norway. This study can therefore be seen as a qualitative case study where two discourses of support and opposition are compared.

My journey as a PhD student began 1 September 2011. I got the position at Østfold University College on the condition I would do my research project on the implementation phase of the merger. In other words, the research project as such was already defined when I entered my position. The expectations from Østfold University College were that my research would contribute to the understanding of mergers in higher education, but apart from that I was free to articulate my own research questions. When I started I did not know much about the higher education sector. My career so far had mainly been in administration in the health sector. My lack of experience could be seen as a drawback as I was not familiar with the sector’s history and all its ups and downs. However, at the same time my understanding of the sector and the university colleges involved in the merger was not affected by any preconceptions that might influence my work. Of course, soon enough I started to develop opinions, but I did not belong to any of the factions that exist in university colleges. This gave me an advantage when I undertook my interviews.

As an employee of one of the merger partners I faced two immediate challenges. The first was related to internal interviews at Østfold, my own workplace; the second was related to interviews at Buskerud and Vestfold. Let us start with the internal interviews. As a newcomer I did not have a “history” at Østfold. I did not belong to any particular group or faction and I did not have any previous collegial or private relations with any of the employees. This made it easier for me to be accepted as “neutral”. In a situation where personal
antagonism between certain people was obvious it was necessary for me to be perceived as trustworthy if the interviewees were to share their experiences with me. As a newcomer I had not flagged a position as a “supporter” or “resister” which made it easier for me to be seen as a neutral. I made use of my inexperience and position as a newcomer in my interviews by choosing phrases like “I am new in the higher education sector”, “I have just started” and “I do not know much about this”. This helped in underlining my neutrality. Also regarding interviewing people at Buskerud and Vestfold, being new at Østfold was an advantage. As the discourse of opposition was dominant at Østfold when I undertook my interviews in the spring of 2012, I was at times taken as a representative of that discourse. The way some interviewees approached me made it clear I was labelled a “resister”. I therefore found it helpful to remind them of my status as a newcomer so as not to be placed in the position of a “defender” of discursive practices dominant at Østfold.

Preconceptions are of great value as they are expressions of insight and experience. They add to the quality of the analysis as a thorough understanding of the complexity in higher education institutions is vital, and they may minimise misunderstandings. However, preconceptions are also manifested worldviews that tend to favour some perspectives and reject others. Having a long history within an organisation constructs an identity that in turn conditions discursive practices. For example, there is a historical division of teacher and researcher identities in the higher education sector (Boyer, 1990, pp. 1-13). These identities condition the construction of support and opposition. There are of course other factors influencing these constructions making the construction of support and opposition a complicated web. The point I try to make here is that being a “blank slate” had some advantages, especially in the interview situation.

When I started my position the decision to terminate the merger process had not yet been made. Given my inexperience and my assigned project I started reading up both on the higher education sector in general and on the ongoing merger process in particular. A number of reports and documents had already been produced, which I read to get a grip on the merger project. I also started reading up on mergers in general and mergers in the higher education sector in particular. I attended open meetings and I had informal conversations about the merger. One huge advantage was the interest people took in the merger. It was not difficult to get people to talk about it as the process was in a critical
phase when I started. Opposition was quite strong and the involvement was high. Another thing I did was to regularly attend board meetings at Østfold. The University College Board meetings are open to the public and they proved to be a very interesting source of information. During these first months I did not focus on differences between the university colleges. I did not visit Buskerud or Vestfold as my research project would focus on the implementation phase. That phase would start in March 2012 after the decision to merge had been made. I saw the time up until then as a preparation for my thesis.

In January 2012 rumours started circulating that there was a possibility for the merger process to be terminated. This was not good news. For a short while I feared my position would be terminated as well as it was linked to the merger. However, I was reassured I would not get fired but my research project needed to involve the merger project in one way or another. I started to consider the consequences of the process being terminated and elaborated two possible paths. The first was to continue to follow the process of the three university colleges. The second was to study the process leading up to the decision to terminate the merger process. When the merger was terminated I had a talk with my supervisor and after some consideration I decided to follow the second path. Although both are of scientific interest and highly inspiring projects, it would be too much work for a single doctoral thesis to do both. After I had made my decision I needed to get started on my “new” project. The very first thing I needed to do was to start my interviews. I wanted the information while it was still “fresh”.

**Data collection**

**Interviews**

I carried out a total of 29 interviews in the spring of 2012. The interviews were open-ended, which means I had only broad themes I wanted the interviewee to reflect upon. Open-ended interviews “explore people’s views of reality and allow the researcher to generate theory” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 103). It was precisely the interviewees’ views of reality I wanted to collect. I had selected a number of events that had happened during the merger process that I wanted the interviewees to talk about (for example the university ambition and the due diligence report). Apart from that I really wanted the interviewees to tell me their story.
I started the interviews by giving a short introduction of my study and then I asked them to tell their story from their point of view. How they had experienced the merger process and what they believed caused the outcome. I asked them to begin when the decision to start the merger process was made and end with the decision to terminate. In that way I tried to limit their narrative scope to the timeframe I had decided to focus my study on. I did not interfere in the narratives because I wanted them to tell their story with their own words. If they drifted too far away from the subject or the timeframe I guided them back on track with follow-up questions, but generally I let them drift quite far before I interfered.

Another aspect of letting them tell their stories without interference was to get an understanding of what they perceived to be the most important events during the merger process. Since language is an important part of my analysis, it was not just what they talked about that interested me. It was also how they talked about it. For example, which words they used and how they portrayed themselves and “the others”.

I decided to start interviewing members of the steering committee immediately after I learned that the merger process was terminated (Table 3.1). The reason I wanted to start with the steering committee was that I assumed they would be interested in telling their story since they were very close to “the action”. And as the steering committee included representatives from different parts of the organisation I hoped I would get narratives from different perspectives. This is a strategy of purposeful sampling which focuses on “selecting information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study” (Patton, 2002, p. 230).

My reason for interviewing people who were central in the merger process was that I assumed they would be interested in the topic and that they would provide narratives allowing me to produce “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) of the stories told. Both faculty heads and administrative leaders were represented there, as well as academic staff and representatives from the unions. In addition there were external board members in the steering committee who could give me an “outside” perspective on things. By hearing the same story from different people with different perspectives and
perceptions of reality I could analyse the merger process using discourse analysis.

All interviews were carried out in the period March–May 2012. I wanted to undertake my interviews as soon as possible after the decision to terminate the merger process had been taken, while the interviewees were still “mentally involved” in the project. Some respondents expressed a sense of value in talking about the merger process. My respondents were primarily representatives from the steering committee and the project secretariat (Table 3.2). I also interviewed a small number of other people, especially from Østfold (Table 3.3).

Table 3.1. Respondents from the steering committee.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steering Committee</th>
<th>University college</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rector</td>
<td>Buskerud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University College Director</td>
<td>Buskerud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chairman of the board</td>
<td>Buskerud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member of the board</td>
<td>Buskerud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade union representative</td>
<td>Buskerud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rector/Chairman of the board</td>
<td>Vestfold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University College Director</td>
<td>Vestfold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member of the board</td>
<td>Vestfold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member of the board</td>
<td>Vestfold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade union representative</td>
<td>Vestfold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student leader</td>
<td>Vestfold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rector/Chairman of the board</td>
<td>Østfold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University College Director</td>
<td>Østfold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member of the board</td>
<td>Østfold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member of the board</td>
<td>Østfold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade union representative</td>
<td>Østfold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student leader</td>
<td>Østfold</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.2. Respondents from the project secretariat.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project secretariat</th>
<th>University college</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chief Communications Officer</td>
<td>Buskerud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Resource Manager</td>
<td>Buskerud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director of Organisation and Communication</td>
<td>Vestfold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Resource Manager</td>
<td>Vestfold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief Communications Officer</td>
<td>Østfold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Resource Manager</td>
<td>Østfold</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.3. Other respondents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Others</th>
<th>University college</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Representative of academic staff</td>
<td>Vestfold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication advisor*</td>
<td>Østfold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief Financial Officer*</td>
<td>Østfold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director of Academic Affairs &amp; Research*</td>
<td>Østfold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member of the board*</td>
<td>Østfold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representative of academic staff</td>
<td>Østfold</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*These interviews were conducted before the decision to terminate the project was made.

Due to my open approach the respondents’ narratives varied widely. Some told the story in a chronological order, focusing on what happened at what time. Others focused more on key events they perceived as important. The fact that I let them speak without interruption made them talk about things they might have left out if I had controlled the interview with strict questions. One example of this was their understanding of what the whole intention of the merger process was. There was an understanding of the process as something done to find the best way to organise the newly merged university college, and there was another understanding of the process as something undertaken to reach a decision to merge or not. This was something I would not have thought of asking. In subsequent interviews I asked that question if the interviewees did not bring it up themselves.
The respondents were positive to being interviewed. Only two people did not respond to my request for an interview. After several emails without getting a response I decided to exclude them from the project (external member of the board at Vestfold and student leader at Buskerud). Apart from these two, the overall response to my request for an interview was overwhelmingly positive. The respondents expressed an interest in my research project, described it as important work and said they would love to read my thesis. When the issue of anonymity came up the response differed. There was an understanding that it would be difficult to anonymise the three university colleges, but personal anonymity was important to several of the interviewees. One respondent said that you have to stand for what you say and therefore there should be no anonymity at all. However, many of them expressed a concern not to be identified, as they could otherwise not be as frank as they wished to be. However, the small number of respondents and the titles made it difficult to secure anonymity. It is not difficult to identify the rector at Østfold if one wishes to do that. So what I did was sending my respondents the quotes I wished to use and described in what context they were going to be used. If the respondent approved, I labelled the quote with the title (for example “Rector, Østfold University College”). If they did not approve the use of title, I offered to use a more generic title like “Member of the steering committee, Østfold University College” or “Manager, Østfold University College”. If they did not wish for me to use the quote at all I removed it from the text. This was a way for me to balance interesting and valuable quotes against demands for anonymity. The more specific the title is, the more interesting it is in the analysis of support and opposition construction. At the same time it is of crucial importance to respect respondents’ wish for anonymity.

Most respondents accepted the quotes as I had written them, and they also accepted my suggested labelling. A few wanted me to use the more anonymous version and a few made minor changes to my suggested quotes. Two wished to have a meeting to discuss the quotes. Overall, the respondents were very positive and helpful, which enriched the analysis tremendously. In the cases where I did not get a response to my e-mail I used the quotes with the generic, more anonymous label. The strategy of involving the respondents to check the quotes for accuracy increases credibility of the study (Creswell, 2014, p. 201).

All interviews were recorded, and transcribed in full by me. Although transcribing interviews is a painstakingly long process, I think the advantages
outweigh the disadvantages. The analytical process starts during transcribing and triggers ideas of how to analyse the data.

**Document studies**

The other source of data I used to do my analysis was documents produced during the merger process. As a merger of the kind I studied produces an enormous amount of reports and other written documents I had to limit my analysis to the ones most central based on my research questions. The documents indicated in Table 3.4 have been analysed:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document</th>
<th>Completion date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The report “A Comprehensive View II” + Attachment</td>
<td>8 March 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The report “Østfold University College’s institutional cooperation – investigation of alternatives to merging with Buskerud University College and Vestfold University College”</td>
<td>30 September 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultative statements to the report “Østfold University College’s institutional cooperation – investigation of alternatives to merging with Buskerud University College and Vestfold University College”</td>
<td>28 October 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workgroup report 1 “Vision, academic profile and strategic objectives”</td>
<td>10 June 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultative statements to the report “Vision, academic profile and strategic objectives”</td>
<td>29 August 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The note of concern to Østfold from Buskerud and Vestfold</td>
<td>11 January 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Østfold’s reply to the note of concern</td>
<td>16 January 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The report “The organisation of a merged university college”</td>
<td>15 February 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultative statements to the report “The organisation of a merged university college”</td>
<td>5 March 2012</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
All documents could easily be accessed through the official website set up as part of the merger process. I downloaded the documents in case the website would be discontinued when the merger process was terminated. This turned out to be a good idea as the website was eventually shut down.

So why did I choose these specific documents instead of others? The answer to that question is that I wanted to analyse different constructions of meaning in different phases of the project. The first document “A comprehensive view II” and its attachment was the first report produced in the merger process. It was on the foundation of this report the decision to continue the merger process was made. As such it represents an important key event. My respondents also repeatedly mentioned this report in the interviews making it relevant to link the construction of meaning to how the report was written.

The next report I chose to analyse was “Østfold University College’s institutional cooperation – investigation of alternatives to merging with Buskerud University College and Vestfold University College”. This report was the result of Østfold hesitating to continue the merger process. As such it represents an important point in time where the continuation of the process was challenged. As with the previous report this was also a report often mentioned in my interviews. What it showed was how the articulated support from Buskerud and Vestfold to the merger was not shared by Østfold. In Østfold the picture was more nuanced and the development of the opposition discourse can be traced back to this report and the background on which it was made. This is further emphasised in the consultative statements following the report. To understand the construction of support and opposition at Østfold this report and its consultative statements play an important role.

The next report to be analysed was the report from workgroup one: “Vision, academic profile and strategic objectives”. This was one of five workgroup reports and it could be argued I should have analysed all of them. However, this was chosen because it dealt with aspects central to my analysis – namely the idea of the merger. What lay in the centre of the construction of support and opposition was the idea of becoming a university. This report focused on that issue making it the most relevant report to analyse. This does not in any way mean there were not interesting aspects in the other reports. I have studied them all as well as the consultative statements following them.
However, doing an in-depth analysis of the magnitude of that material would exceed the limitations of this study.

The note of concern was selected for analysis as it described the tension between the merger partners at the time. The “concerns” in the note of concern and in the reply from Østfold also point directly to the issues that constituted the construction of support and opposition. It is a manifestation of the different worldviews that evolved at the three university colleges. Although the documents are short, they represent a key event in the merger process as doubts concerning the future of the project are formally communicated.

The last documents I analysed were the final report written by the three Rectors, “The organisation of a merged university college”, and the following consultative statements to that report. These documents were important because it was on that basis the formal decision to merge or not was to be made. As it turned out, the merger was terminated before such a decision could be made, but that does not in any way diminish the role these documents played in the outcome of the merger process. It was at this point opposition at Østfold could be identified as the dominant discourse. As we will see in subsequent chapters the reports were mainly written from a perspective of support. It was the consultative statements that balanced this perspective describing arguments of opposition. It was these reports and consultative statements that in addition to the interviews provided the empirical base necessary to undertake my analysis and answer my research questions.

**Data analysis**

After transcribing the interviews I started grouping all key events and arguments used for describing why the merger was terminated. At this point I had not yet articulated my research questions around the construction of support and opposition, and how support changed to opposition. I only had a very loose and preliminary question asking, “What happened?”. I knew I wanted to explore the process leading up to the decision not to merge, but it was not until I started thinking about the statement of why the merger was terminated – how this statement was constructed – that I “found my way”.

After the merger had been terminated the three university college boards needed to formally put an end to the project. This is described in chapter 9 as
“the last board meeting”. The board meeting took place on 29 March 2012 and the decision to end the merger process was formulated as follows:

The merger process between the three university colleges is terminated due to substantial resistance from Østfold University College.

The boards at Buskerud and Vestfold accepted this proposed text. However, in the minutes from the board meeting at Østfold there is a remark in the text stating that:

The board was of the clear understanding that all three parties must take their share of the blame for the ‘merger project’ failure. On the basis of that, board member Helge Ramsdal proposed the following change to the proposed resolution:

‘The merger process between the three university colleges is terminated’. This proposal was unanimously adopted.

At Østfold the board did not want to state that the cause of the merger termination was “substantial resistance” from Østfold. They simply stated that the merger was terminated. I started thinking – why is that? Why is it that the board at Østfold does not want to be labelled “resisters”? If someone is a resister then the binary position must be a supporter. It was obviously something about this dichotomisation that inspired the board at Østfold to change the phrasing and reject the term “resistance”, and I was eager to find out what it was. So from this event at the very end of the merger process I decided to work my way backwards trying to untangle all interwoven threads that conditioned this situation.

Initially I was very interested in the term “resistance” and tried to analyse how resistance at Østfold grew over time. However, I soon discovered that linking resistance to certain opposing entities such as organisations or people was not a fruitful path. Seeing Buskerud and Vestfold as supporters and Østfold as a resister was a much too simple and superficial way of seeing things. The same was the case with seeing management as supporters and workers as resisters. Although I believe an analysis based on for example Labour Process Theory could be applicable in which studies of resistance emphasise antagonism between management and workers, I did not find such an approach suitable for my study. It was not specific aspects of people or organisations I was
interested in, but “aspects of historical discursive practices” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 233). The discursive practices of support and opposition transcended hierarchical levels in such a way that in my case Labour Process Theory felt restrictive.

Other opposing entities could be the differences in identity. The non-university sector perceives a division between teacher and researcher identity. This goes for institutions as well as for faculties and individuals. I had an early hypothesis that a research identity would be more compatible with arguments supporting the merger and a teacher identity more compatible with opposing it. Although my analysis shows tendencies in that direction it would be far too simple to use that as an analytical starting point.

What I had was a whole series of potential entities and events conditioning the outcome of the merger process. I realised that I had to let go of finding a fixed point on which I could contrast “resistance”. Instead of focusing on why the board removed “resistance” from the phrase I started thinking about what had constituted the use of resistance in the first place. Obviously the use of “resistance” indicates a difference of interests. There were deviating opinions between the merger partners on the merger process to such an extent that the merger was terminated. Describing someone or something as “resistance” is a form of discursive positioning. This positioning is based on a specific worldview. At the same time the rejection of the term “resistance” is based on a conflicting worldview. Now I started to make some progress. What I in fact was interested in were these different worldviews.

Instead of taking departure in the concept of resistance I wanted to take departure in the construction of the worldview that labelled other worldviews as resistance. At the same time I wanted to take departure in the construction of the worldview that was labelled resistance. I decided to call these two worldviews support and opposition. I also decided to use the term opposition instead of resistance as resistance bears with it connotations I prefer to avoid. It was not the worldviews per se I was interested in but rather how the different worldviews came to be. It was the construction of the worldviews that interested me. In the end I had finally ended up with an understanding of what I wanted to study. It was the construction of support and opposition.

For a very good introduction of the concept of resistance see Huzell (2005, pp. 18-50).
However, something was still missing. I needed to add one more aspect in order to fully capture what I wanted to investigate. The construction of support and opposition is not static positions representing certain groups or interests. That sort of thinking was precisely what I wanted to avoid when I decided to use the concepts of support and opposition. These concepts are dynamic processes prone to change as they are produced and reproduced over time. This means that worldviews change and support can turn into opposition. In addition to the construction of support and opposition it was this process of change I wanted to study.

In the end I ended up with the three research questions I introduced in the introduction chapter. The first relates to the construction of support and was formulated as “how was the merger process described and explained from a support perspective?”. In this research question I explore all aspects of the support discourse. It covers all arguments and interpretations of a worldview seen from the support perspective. In the second research question I do the same but this time it is from an opposition perspective: “how was the merger process described and explained from an opposition perspective?”. In the last research question I focus on change. The question “how was change from support to opposition explained?” covers all aspects of the processes of change that occurred through the merger process.

The three research questions constitute what I aim to analyse in subsequent chapters. I have chosen to focus on discourses rather than groups. This means I try not to succumb to the temptation of talking about “support” and “opposition” in relation to certain groups or fixed entities. I find it very difficult to avoid doing so because in our daily speech such labelling is common. We easily refer to persons as “supporters” or “resisters” and by that we create in-groups and out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1985), which in turn affect our behaviour. Of course, that is not “wrong”, but it cements stereotypes and leaves analysis to superficial descriptions of groups. I find it far more interesting to delve into the depth of mechanisms conditioning the construction of meaning. To do that we need to acknowledge how the power of wider discourses conditions our construction of meaning, in this case the two discourses of education market and academic drift. I have already introduced them in the chapter on mergers in higher education and I will discuss them more thoroughly in the next chapter on conceptual framework. The important point to make in this methodology chapter is that an analysis of the construction of
support and opposition needs to take wider discourses of education market and academic drift into consideration.

Now that I had decided to use the two concepts of support and opposition my next problem was to decide what support and opposition was in relation to. When I say “support”, what does that mean? Exactly what was supported? The answer to that question came when I began analysing my data. Soon a pattern started to evolve. What my interviewees talked about were basically two things. They talked about why they wanted to merge (or not), why it was a good idea (or not), why it was necessary (or not) and so on. They were narratives of justification or rejection where why was linked to an idea of the merger’s existence. Without this idea there would be no merger initiative. What I found was that the dominant idea of why this merger was initiated was the idea of achieving university status. I therefore chose to ascribe the idea of becoming a university to the discourse of merger support. Of course, this idea was challenged, which is represented by the binary discourse of opposition. I do see the problem in ascribing a specific idea to a discourse of support. It could be argued that many things can be supported. For example, a merger could be supported without including any university ambitions. However, I found that the university ambition was salient in all aspects of the merger process, which made it analytically suitable to use this idea to contrast support from opposition. What will become clear in my analysis is that although the idea of university status is supported, it might not be enough to support the merger anyway. Other mechanisms condition the construction of support and opposition besides this idea.

This leads us to the other thing my interviewees talked about. Besides talking about why, they also talked about how the merger process was conducted and how the merged university college was supposed to be constructed. What they talked about was the development of PhD programmes, the organisation of faculties, the consequences of the due diligence, the allocation of resources and so on. What they talked about was how the idea was going to be operationalised. So far in my analysis I had developed four concepts I could use to further investigate the construction of support and opposition. These were support, opposition, idea and operationalisation. In addition I had identified the two wider discourses of education market and academic drift. These were operationalised into the conceptual pairs of outwards/inwards perspective and modern/traditional perspective respectively. At this point I
had developed four conceptual pairs that became the categories I used to analyse the discursive practices of support and opposition.

My next step was to localise key events in time so I knew when in the process important events had occurred. Explanations and arguments were then grouped based on whether they supported the merger or not. In addition they were grouped either as belonging to the idea of the merger or the operationalisation of the merger. As explained above the idea of the merger included rhetorical arguments about what the ambition of the merger was and why it was necessary. The operationalisation of the idea included rhetorical arguments on how the new organisation was to be organised. By setting key events into a time frame using my four conceptual pairs of support/opposition, idea/operationalisation, outwards/inwards and modern/traditional I could start analysing the change from support to opposition.

What I also discovered when doing my analysis was the way my respondents used metaphors in their narratives, and the importance and significance of such metaphors. A metaphor is defined as “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 5). The main function of metaphors is to convey understanding in a communication process. They are a vital part of our language, and important to my analysis as they are themselves discursive constructions:

> When we signify things through one metaphor rather than another, we are constructing our reality in one way rather than another. Metaphors structure the way we think and the way we act, and our systems of knowledge and belief, in a pervasive and fundamental way. (Fairclough, 1992, p. 194)

Thus, metaphors are a way of thinking and seeing things, but at the same time they are a way of not seeing things as they highlight some aspects and at the same time put other aspects in the background (Morgan, 2006, pp. 4-5). This way they contribute to different discourse positions. One example of a metaphor is “marriage”, which was primarily used in the construction of support. I chose to use this and other metaphors in my analysis as they add to the understanding of how support and opposition was constructed.

**Memos**

From the outset of my research project and all the way through to the very end I have written memos. Memos are short informal pieces of text aimed to assist the researcher in the process (Miles & Huberman, 1994, pp. 72-76). They are
notes written to capture aspects of the research project as the project evolves. It would be impossible to remember everything that goes on in a research project without putting it into writing. In addition the writing in itself stimulates the creative process of producing research (Becker, 2007, p. 17).

There are different forms of memos focusing on different aspects of the research project. Some memos concern theoretical aspects, while others focus on methodological or analytical aspects. Memos are also helpful evaluating one’s progress. In the memo example below written 19 January 2012 I reflect on possible alternatives to continuing my research project if the merger is terminated:

**Memo about the project’s future:** If there is no merger, I have two preliminary alternative scenarios. The first is to ask the question about what happened. Create an evaluation project where I retrospectively study the period up until the decision. The second is to continue the research project and examine the processes that come in the wake of the decision. Cooperation with other institutions and internal processes will in this case be central. If Østfold withdraws and Vestfold and Buskerud continue with the merger it can be relevant to conduct further research on that merger. The downside would be that I do not study my own organisation. I must clarify Østfold’s interests here. If the last option becomes relevant, I will maintain my original research questions. This is also something that I think is very interesting nationally. It may be inconvenient to travel to the different institutions (but I would surely have done that anyway). The question is whether it is more interesting to follow a merger process or study a merger that did not happen?

What the memo shows is how I struggled with how to proceed with my research project if the merger process came to be terminated. The memos helped me clarifying my position and led me in the end to choose the path of studying what led to the merger being terminated. One should notice that this memo was written two months before the merger was actually terminated, which shows how affected I was by rumours and talk about the merger process. It also shows how the discourse of opposition had become dominant at Østfold. At this point it was clearly a possibility that the merger would be terminated.

I also wrote memos where I tried to develop my conceptual pairs and how they were linked. In the example below I reflect on the discursive practices of support and opposition:
The discursive practice in the support and the opposition discourse differed in the choice of words, but also in how the discursive practice was related to a wider discourse. The discursive practice in the support discourse was related to a market (or enterprise) discourse connected to the idea of the merged organisation to become a university. The social object of support was constructed through the use of words like competition, survival, necessity, marginalisation and position. The idea to be a university was justified by a need to *survive* in a globalised *market*. It was *necessary* to merge in order to become a university. Otherwise one would be *marginalised* in the *competition*. The support discourse therefore focused on the idea.

The opposition discourse used many of the same words as the support discourse, but in this case they were not used in the context of a market discourse. Instead the discursive practice focused on the power relations between the three merger partners. The *competition* was between the merger partners, and in order not to be *marginalised* in the merger process and *survive* as an institution it was *necessary* to *position* oneself in the merger process. The focus in the opposition discourse was on the operationalisation.

The discourse of education market has become so dominant that it is in many respects taken for granted. It holds a “hegemonic position” and has become “common sense”. It is the “natural” way of seeing things, which means that people are not consciously aware of them.

In writing memos like this I developed my analytical framework, and it helped me organising the various discursive practices that I found relevant in the project. The memo also reveals the analytical perspective I chose to use. At the time I wrote the memo I was clearly inspired by discourse analysis. Although I do not follow a particular method of discourse analysis I am influenced by critical discourse analysis and especially Norman Fairclough’s take on critical discourse analysis (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 1989, 1992, 1993, 2003, 2005, 2010).

There is no set procedure for doing discourse analysis; people approach it in different ways according to the specific nature of the project, as well as their own views of discourse (Fairclough, 1992, p. 225). Discourse, and any specific instance of discursive practice, is seen as simultaneously (i) a verbal text, spoken or written; (ii) discourse practice (text production and text interpretation); (iii) sociocultural practice (Fairclough, 2010, p. 132). These discourse dimensions are dialectically interlinked and it is this interlinking that makes language a social practice.

The method of discourse analysis includes linguistic *description* of the language text, *interpretation* of the relationship between the (productive and interpretative) discursive processes and the text, and *explanation* of the
relationship between the discursive process and the social process. A special feature of the approach is that the link between sociocultural practice and text is mediated by discursive practice (Fairclough, 2010, p. 132).

**Method triangulation**

Using different sources of data can have huge advantages in getting a better understanding on what went on in the merger process. An example of that is a respondent talking about how the university ambition was formulated in one of the workgroup reports:

> We solved the problem in workgroup one by saying that the new university college has the goal of eventually becoming a university. But this formulation was chosen to hide the divergent views about this goal: Vestfold and Buskerud saw it as an explicit aim to achieve university status, while Østfold had strong reservations. So the disagreement on this issue was much stronger than can be seen from the document.

(Member of the board, Østfold University College)

If I had chosen to do only a document analysis the dividing opinions between Østfold, Buskerud and Vestfold would have been more difficult to access. The difference of position is to some extent revealed in the consultative statements but interviews add to the nuances in the two main discourses of support and opposition. It also brings knowledge on the thoughts behind writing the way the workgroups did in their reports. It is crucial not to take text at face value. Of course, this goes for interviews as well. The interviews brought an extra dimension to the analysis, which I would not have had if I had only done document analysis. In addition, method triangulation improves credibility (Merriam, 2009, p. 215).

**Translation issues**

Translating quotes from Norwegian to English posed a linguistic problem. A word by word translation does not work very well as it often alters the meaning intended by the interviewees. On the other hand, a too “interpretive” translation could potentially alter the meaning intended as well. For this reason I have done limited analysis on the textual level and put more focus on the discursive and social level of the texts. In practice this means that the use of specific words, grammar and other specific linguistic aspects of a text have had to give way to analysing the intended meaning of a text in relation to a wider context. An example is this quote:
One did not clearly express the ambition to become a university but instead that one had an ambition to start a doctorate in each of the major main areas that were defined by workgroup 1 and later also defined by the other workgroups, like those looking into management and organisation of faculties. So one went ahead, and in retrospect one might say that perhaps there was a bigger conflict than we realised, I think.

Here the use of “one” instead of the personal “I” or “we” shows how the informant is distancing himself from what he is talking about. Using the neutral “one” shows a lack of commitment. This is just about how far I go in analysing on a textual level. In the subsequent analysis of this quote I focus on placing the meaning of the text in a wider context. In this case it was how university status was seen as a premise for or a consequence of the merger, which influenced both the support and the opposition discourse.

The issue of translation lead to a number of problems in my analysis. As a discourse analysis per se is an analysis of text, the translation of a text leads to the loss of linguistic nuances and thereby potentially lowers the level of quality in the analysis. My own limitations in English have been a continuous challenge in writing this thesis.

Near the end of my project I received professional assistance in proofreading the text to secure an adequate level of linguistic quality. This led to another round of going through my analysis to see whether meanings had been altered. After some additional changes, the text was proofread once more before being submitted.

Disposition

How to structure a thesis is always a question of balancing pros and cons. In my case, I struggled between two very different structures. The first option would be to structure the thesis according to a timeline. This would mean ascribing different chapters of analysis to different moments in time. By using this form of disposition I could describe the construction of support and opposition based on how the merger process evolved over time. I could focus on specific events or discursive ruptures and place them in a timeline. This is a way of structuring a thesis that makes it easy for the reader to follow the process. However, the concepts I use in my analysis did not occur just once. They permeated the whole process. By using a disposition based on a timeline I
would stand the risk of repeating myself as concepts were used continuously in the construction of support and opposition. One example of this is the concept of “idea”. The idea of becoming a university was used in discursive practices all the way through the merger process. I had difficulties deciding exactly where in the timeline I should have my main discussion of this idea.

The second possible structure would be to use a disposition based on the concepts I developed in my conceptual framework. I will discuss my conceptual framework more thoroughly in the next chapter but for now it will be sufficient to say that I use four conceptual pairs in my analysis. These conceptual pairs are support/opposition, idea/operationalisation, outwards/inwards and modern/traditional. A structure based on these conceptual pairs would make it easier for the reader to follow the argument on how these concepts were used as discursive practices. All aspects of each conceptual pair would be placed in the same place in the thesis. On the other hand, the possibility of describing how the process evolved over time would get lost. Especially change from support to opposition where focus was more on the operationalisation than the idea would be harder to analyse with this disposition.

After weighing pros and cons I decided to use the disposition of structuring my thesis along a timeline. This is a form of analytic story where everything is laid out “on a plate at the outset” (Silverman, 2010, p. 344). The concepts I use in my analysis are further discussed in the next chapter. I would argue that when doing research on a process such as the pre-merger phase of a merger, structuring the text as a process not only makes it easier to read, but it also better reflects my research questions on how support and opposition was described, explained and changed.

**Summary**

In this chapter I have tried to “tell the story of how I told the story”. I started by explaining that I have taken a qualitative approach inspired by discourse analysis, and especially Norman Fairclough’s take on critical discourse analysis. I gave an overview of myself as a researcher and the context I have operated within. I then continued to explain my two data collection methods of interviews and documents. The empirical data was analysed using the four conceptual pairs of support/opposition, idea/operationalisation, outwards/inwards and modern/traditional. I continued with some reflections
on translation issues before ending the chapter with a short description of how I have structured the thesis. In the next chapter I will discuss my conceptual framework and the four conceptual pairs more thoroughly. These are the concepts I use to answer my research questions.
Chapter 4 – Conceptual framework

In this chapter I present my conceptual framework. I start by describing the theoretical base on which the framework is constructed. After that I introduce the two conceptual pairs that constitute the foundation of the framework (support/opposition and idea/operationalisation), and I posit an assumption that drives the analysis. I end the chapter with the introduction of two displays that add another dimension to my conceptual framework with the introduction of the conceptual pairs of outwards/inwards and modern/traditional. A conceptual framework is “the underlying structure, the scaffolding or frame” of a study (Merriam, 2009, p. 66). As such it constitutes the foundation on how a study is constructed as it:

*Explains, either graphically or in narrative form, the main things to be studied – the key factors, constructs or variables – and the presumed relationships among them* (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 18).

A conceptual framework positions the research as it is drawn from literature within a specific field and from a specific disciplinary orientation. It guides the researcher through a study, and it informs the reader of the researcher’s position.

Discourse

As described earlier in this thesis my research questions relate to: 1) how the merger process can be described and explained from a support perspective, 2) how the merger process can be described and explained from an opposition perspective, and 3) how change from support to opposition can be explained. The main theoretical base I take departure from in order to answer these questions is critical discourse analysis (CDA). A common definition of CDA is:

CDA sees discourse – language use in speech and writing – as a form of ‘social practice’. Describing discourse as social practice is based on a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s), which frame it: The discursive event is shaped by them, but it also shapes them. That is, discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned – it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people. It is constitutive both in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo, and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it. Since discourse is so socially consequential, it gives rise to important issues of power. Discursive practices may have major ideological effects – that is, they can help produce and reproduce unequal power relations (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258).
This definition involves a whole set of aspects that need further elaboration in order to present my conceptual framework. First of all, the concept of “discourse” is not easy to use. As Fairclough (1992, p. 3) admits; “discourse is a difficult concept, largely because there are so many conflicting and overlapping definitions formulated from various theoretical and disciplinary standpoints”. This can lead us into a situation where discourse comes close to standing for everything, and thus nothing (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000, p. 1127).

In this thesis I use discourse, as spoken or written language, both referring to specific discourses of for example merger support and merger opposition, and to wider discourses of education market and academic drift. Discourse is then “a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)” (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 1, italics in original). Talking about the world, and understanding the world, is a relational process of social practice. Seeing language as a form of social practice implies that language is a part of society, a social process, and socially conditioned by other (non-linguistic) parts of society (Fairclough, 1989, p. 22).

Any instance of discourse is called a discursive event, and it involves a dialectical relationship between the discursive event and society. Discourses are social constructions but they do not appear out of thin air. They are shaped and conditioned by situations, institutions and social structures. At the same time they constitute social identities, social relations and systems of knowledge and belief. In other words, they affect how we perceive ourselves, ourselves in relation to others, and what we believe in.

These social identities, relations and systems of knowledge and beliefs are not only reproduced through discourse but also transformed by discourse. This means that discourses of support and opposition need to be understood as dynamic processes shaped by and shaping people’s discursive practices. It can explain a certain subject position, but also how a position might change from supporting a merger to opposing it, and vice versa. Positions are never carved in stone but constantly reproduced and (sometimes) transformed through discourse. Central concepts of how these positions are reproduced and transformed are those of ideology and power.
Ideology can be defined as “a coherent and relatively stable set of beliefs or values” (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 8, italics in original), and is the “prime means of manufacturing consent” (Fairclough, 1989, p. 4). We often think of ideology in a political context such as neoliberalism that sees higher education as entities operating in a market. New Public Management is an ideologically driven concept based on the principles of neoliberalism, which promotes the ideas of effectiveness, efficiency, marketisation and competition (Lynch, 2005). However, ideology can also refer to “more hidden and latent types of everyday beliefs, which often appear disguised as conceptual metaphors and analogies” (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 8).

Common merger metaphors like a marriage are based on certain ideological aspects on how one should think about a merger. In a modern Western society a marriage is first and foremost based on feelings. Alternative forms of marriage include arranged marriages and forced marriages. These are forms of marriage based on cultural ideologies different from traditional Western culture. The use of ideologies in metaphors therefore conditions how discourses of mergers are constructed. Fairclough (1992, p. 87) understands ideology to be:

Significations/constructions of reality (the physical world, social relations, social identities), which are built into various dimensions of the forms/meanings of discursive practices, and which contribute to the production, reproduction or transformation of relations of domination.

Relations of domination implies that discursive practices work ideologically in exerting power to achieve a position where ideology becomes “common sense” and understood as “natural”. The close relationship between ideology and power is explained by Fairclough (1989, p. 2):

The nature of the ideological assumptions embedded in particular conventions, and so the nature of those conventions themselves, depends on the power relations which underlie the conventions; and because they are means of legitimising existing social relations and differences of power, simply through the recurrence of ordinary, familiar ways of behaving which takes these relations and power differences for granted.

Ideologies and power relations that are taken for granted can be characterised as holding a hegemonic position within a specific discursive field. However,
there is a constant struggle for discourses to become dominant and hold that hegemonic position. Discourses of support and opposition can each operate as the dominant discourse in a certain context. For example, a discourse of support can be dominant in a specific organisation while an opposition discourse is dominant in another. And as a result of change in hegemonic position, a dominant support discourse can be replaced by an opposition discourse.

These power struggles simultaneously operate on different levels. They can be analytically separated into an individual level, a group level, an organisational level, and a societal level. This means that a dominant discourse on one level does not necessarily have to be dominant at another level. One example of this is a dominant societal discourse of an education market. On individual and group level the market discourse could be contested by a discourse of “academic values”. The constant struggle for hegemonic position depicts the struggle for power. Fairclough (1989, p. 46, italics in original) says that:

Power in discourse is to do with powerful participants controlling and constraining the contributions of non-powerful participants.

These constraints condition what participants can allow themselves to say and do to each other. This is not limited to formal hierarchical positions in an organisation but involves all sorts of relations. The subject position a participant occupies also condition constraints. For example, in a discourse of research-based education, holding an identity as a researcher may control and constrain what a colleague with a teacher identity might allow him- or herself to say. The dominant discourse of research-based education, which in turn is based on the primacy of the knowledge society, marginalises opposing discourses of conflicting identities.

Support, opposition, idea and operationalisation

Based on my research questions two binary concepts depicting contradictory worldviews are used as analytical elements in the conceptual framework. These are “support” and “opposition”. One problem with only using two concepts is that empirical material may be interpreted in many ways. By reducing plurality to two discourses, variation might get lost in the process (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000, p. 1142). One example of this could be a discourse of “indifference” where the merger is neither supported nor opposed. However,
this is not only a question of analytical delimitation, but also a question of pragmatic delimitation of what is to be considered to be in or out of scope. It is of imperative importance to remember that the discourses of support and opposition are not static entities firmly linked to specific individuals or groups of people. What is considered support and opposition is a relational process constructed through discursive practices.

The next step in the development of my conceptual framework is to relate the discourses of support and opposition to a context within the discursive field of a merger process. I do this by searching for discursive ruptures in my data. Discursive ruptures point to conflicts or de-stabilisation (Foucault, 2012, p. 212). This means that instead of looking for homogeneity I look for discursive breaking points where the official discourse of support is challenged. Identifying ruptures can give ideas of the origin of certain discourses. One discursive rupture is the issue of university status. This is a fundamental question of the rationale why the three university colleges should merge. I conceptualise this as “idea”. The idea of university status is in itself a discursive construction conditioned by ideologies of education market and academic drift. Therefore supporting or opposing an idea of university status reflects in what ways these conditioning discourses interact and form a specific worldview. As ideologies can answer the question why (Brunsson, 1985, p. 29), there is a link between ideology and my concept of “idea”.

Other discursive ruptures are questions of resource allocation, especially in regard to the development of PhD programmes and location of faculty management. These are questions of how the merger process was to be conducted, and how the merged organisation was to be constructed. I conceptualise this as “operationalisation”. The two concepts of idea and operationalisation are inductively developed through initial data analysis. I place the discourses of support and opposition, together with the concepts of idea and operationalisation, in a conceptual map illustrating different analytical possibilities (Table 4.1). I described how I developed the concepts of support, opposition, idea and operationalisation in chapter 3 on methodology.
Table 4.1. Conceptual map of support, opposition idea, and operationalisation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Idea (why)</th>
<th>Operationalisation (how)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>Opposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposition</td>
<td>Opposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposition</td>
<td>Support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this conceptual map four possible alternatives of support and opposition can be studied

1. The support of both the idea and the operationalisation
2. The support of the idea but not the operationalisation
3. The opposition of both the idea and the operationalisation
4. The opposition of the idea but not the operationalisation

In my analysis the idea of becoming a university is ascribed to the discourse of support. This means that in the support discourse the point of the merger was to become a university. University status was seen as the rationale for initiating the merger in the first place. The binary position is then to oppose the idea of becoming a university. Supporting the operationalisation of the merger involves discursive practices of preferring specific ways of organising. The opposition discourse then represent the binary position in rejecting those discursive practices and presenting others. In my analysis this is expressed as preferred strategies of resource allocation. The conceptual map allows for a discourse analysis that can unveil ideological interests and power struggle that condition discursive and social practice. I posit that the link between idea and operationalisation is not arbitrary but rather that the idea takes precedence over the operationalisation of the idea as long as the idea is supported and the operationalisation of the idea does not lead to a disadvantageous power position.

The mechanism that operates in the idea and operationalisation relation constitutes the foundation of how change from support to opposition is explained.

My proposition can be broken down into three separate statements
• If the idea is supported and the operationalisation of the idea does not lead to a disadvantageous power position, then the idea takes precedence over the operationalisation of the idea and there is support.
• If the idea is supported and the operationalisation of the idea leads to a disadvantageous power position, then the operationalisation of the idea takes precedence over the idea and there is opposition.
• If the idea is opposed, then the operationalisation of the idea takes precedence over the idea and there is opposition.

It all depends on whether the power balance is moved in one’s favour or not. As long as the idea is supported and the balance of power is moved in one’s favour one will remain a supporter. It is not until the power balance is moved in one’s disfavour that operationalisation will take precedence over the idea. By “take precedence” I mean where discursive practices will have its focus. In a dominant support discourse the discursive practice will focus on the idea, while in a dominant opposition discourse it will focus on the operationalisation. The difference in focus partly explains the incommensurability of the two dominant discourses. They are not “talking about the same thing”.

In addition to the basic conceptual framework described above, two frameworks based on the orders of discourse of “education market” and “academic drift” are central in my analysis. I have already introduced the discourses of education market and academic drift in the chapter on mergers in higher education. In the next section I describe how the discourse of education market is used in my conceptual framework. After that I do the same with academic drift.

**Outwards and inwards perspective**

Two rather different perspectives are used by the two discourses of support and opposition. It can best be visualised using a display showing how the concept of “competition” is discursively constructed (Figure 4.1). How language is used is of importance, “for it not only reflects our thinking but it contributes to a construction of reality” (Gumport, 2000, p. 75).
In the inwards perspective competition takes place between the three merger partners. The merger process in this case would be to secure a good position in the merged organisation. Negotiation is a key word and the merger process is about deciding whether there should be a merger or not. From an outwards perspective on the other hand, competition is discursively constructed as something between the new, merged university college and other higher education institutions. This notion of competition is driven by an assumption that positioning is about positioning in a market instead of positioning in the merger process. In the support discourse there is an acknowledgement of the idea of an education market, leading to a discursive practice focusing on that. In the opposition discourse the notion of an education market is not necessarily rejected but it is not used as a discursive practice.

Words are used differently depending on whether competition is seen as something between the merger partners or something between the new, merged university college and other higher education institutions. I have already mentioned “competition”. “Necessity” is another term used differently. According to the support discourse it is necessary to merge in order to survive the competition (Drowley et al., 2013). In this case it is a matter of existence. In the opposition discourse it was not necessary to merge in order to survive in a market, but it was necessary to get a good result from merger negotiations in order to survive as an institution. If not, the merger would be a takeover where the existing organisation would be completely dominated by others. Survival is linked to organisational identity rather than organisational existence. Necessity is in this case linked to the merger process.
A term closely linked to “competition” and “necessity” is “marginalisation”. In the support discourse the three university colleges would become marginalised in the education market if they did not merge. Marginalisation would be a consequence of losing out in the competition if one did not go through with the merger. That is why the merger was necessary. In the opposition discourse marginalisation is a consequence of losing the power struggle in the merger process. It was necessary to get a good negotiation result in order not to lose out in the competition of resource allocation and by that be marginalised. A final term used differently is “positioning”. From an outwards perspective positioning means positioning in a market. It is relational to other higher education institutions. From an inwards perspective positioning means positioning in the merger process. It is relational to the other merger partners.

The terms “competition”, “necessity”, “marginalisation” and “positioning” are used differently depending on whether focus is on an education market or not. The outwards perspective is used in the construction of support, which also focuses on the idea, while the inwards perspective is used in the construction of opposition focusing on operationalisation. It is “outwards” in the sense that the support discourse is based on a worldview where “we” is the merged organisation and “they” are other higher education institutions. It is “inwards” in the sense that the opposition discourse is based on a worldview where “we” is one’s own organisation and “they” are the other merger partners. The concepts of outwards and inwards contribute to the conceptual framework as analytical tools to analyse constructions of support and opposition in relation to a wider discourse of education market.

**Modern and traditional perspective**

Academic drift refers to the tendency where non-university higher education institutions become more like universities. Norway has a binary system in higher education separating the university sector from the non-university sector. How the different types of higher education institutions are ranked is also a matter of which discourse one subscribes to. A conceptual description of the binary and the unified system can visually show how higher education institutions are ranked (Figure 4.2).
From a traditional perspective the binary system is still in place. The systems are regarded as equal but different. They do different things. Historically, university colleges were set up as an alternative to the universities, focusing on short-cycle vocational educations. Focus was on teaching, not on research. As I discussed in chapter 2 they were developed as a means to bring relevant study programmes out to the regions where that type of competence was needed. They were also a response to higher demands for education and thus became a tool for mass education. Therefore a good university college is considered “better” than a new university. They simply do different things than a university. It is important to notice that the terms “good”, “bad” and “better” are not quantitative measures but merely illustrations of discursive practice. In the university sector the traditional “old” universities of Bergen and Oslo are considered of higher status and “better” than new universities like Agder University or Stavanger University. A merger based on the intention of becoming a university is not considered being “better” from a traditional perspective as the university colleges offer a different set of study programmes. Their purpose in the higher education sector is different from the purpose of universities. The opposition discourse was based on a historical perspective of the rationale for state colleges. In this sense the opposition discourse can be described as “traditional”.

From a modern perspective the binary system has been transformed into a unified system where university status is always better than being a university
college. The reason for that view is twofold. Firstly, universities stand a better chance competing in the education market. They attract more and better students and staff, and they stand a better chance of getting research funding. Secondly, there is an academic drift in the non-university sector, transforming the higher education institutions of university colleges into being more like universities. In a knowledge society, research values that are prevalent at universities hold higher status than practical knowledge that is (traditionally) more prevalent in university colleges. As a consequence, achieving university status is the ultimate goal. Academic drift is partly a result of policy-maker demands for research-based education, forcing non-university institutions to prioritise research, and of an urge to increase status.

The support discourse represents a “modern” perspective in the sense that structural change in the Norwegian higher education system from a binary to a unified system is welcomed. Academic drift is from this perspective not only inevitable, it is desired. The opposition discourse represents a “traditional” perspective advocating for keeping the separation of universities and non-universities. Here the discursive practice is based on the original intention of developing university colleges as an alternative to universities. This does not mean that research does not have a place in the non-university sector. It is more a question of balance between research and education. This manifests itself in whether one shall develop PhD programmes and apply for university status or not.

The support discourse can be summarised as “outwards” and “modern” while the opposition discourse can be summarised as “inwards” and “traditional” (Table 4.2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of discourse</th>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Opposition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic drift</td>
<td>Modern</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market</td>
<td>Outwards</td>
<td>Inwards</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 4.2. Discourses of support and opposition in relevance to academic drift and market.*
These concepts are value laden where “outwards” and “modern” have a more positive ring to them than “inwards” and “traditional”. Even the categorisation of “support” and “opposition” is value laden. What is considered supported and opposed in my conceptual framework is determined by what represents the idea and the operationalisation of that idea. The idea in this research project is the idea of merger in order to become a university. The university ambition is the foundational idea of the merger according to the support discourse. Therefore, the opposite discourse position is to oppose that idea. Hypothetically one could ascribe an idea of staying independent to a support discourse. However, this would be at odds with the narratives describing support and opposition based on the university ambition idea. In other words, the labelling of support and opposition is based on data findings and thus constructed inductively as part of the analysis. Support and opposition are not to be viewed as static categories but rather as fluctuating and relational discourse positions. The categorisation in a table is purely for analytical reasons.

The four binary conceptual pairs can be placed in a table with support, idea, modern and outwards on one side and opposition, operationalisation, traditional and inwards on the other (Table 4.3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Opposition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Idea</td>
<td>Operationalisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outwards</td>
<td>Inwards</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This construction may lead to a faulty understanding of dualism where all concepts on each side construct a unitary system (Karlsson & Eriksson, 2000, pp. 99-100). Such an understanding of congruency between the conceptual pairs on each side would mean a simplification of the mechanisms operating between the concepts on each side, and between the two sides. Rather than dualism I would argue that the conceptual pairs operate in a dialectical relationship with each other.
The mechanisms operating in the discourse orders of education market and academic drift are two intertwined lines that condition mergers in higher education. It is not as much the acceptance or rejection of an education market or academic drift that are the foundations of the construction of the support and opposition discourses, although the idea of an education market is to some extent challenged as it is occasionally viewed more as an ideological construction than a substantial reality. Thus, it is the focus on competition, and the value of academic drift that constitute the different discourses. In the opposition discourse there may or may not be an acceptance that there is an education market. That is not the focal point. The focal point in the opposition discourse is competition between the merger partners. That is the context that arguments against a merger are drawn from. In the opposition discourse academic drift do not necessarily hold any value. It is not a wanted change to become more like the universities. Opposing the idea of becoming a university is rooted in the opposition to academic drift and as such goes to the very core of what the non-university sector is and should be. In that way it is an expression of a specific ideology valuing a differentiation of higher education.

Summary
What I have intended to do in this chapter is to develop a conceptual framework that can be used in my analysis. The framework consists of four conceptual pairs. These pairs are support/opposition, idea/operationalisation, modern/traditional and outwards/inwards. These pairs of concepts constitute the basis on which my analysis is conducted. Support and opposition are the two main discourses driving the analysis, and I use the two concepts of idea and operationalisation to answer the research questions. The two wider discourses of education market and academic drift with their pairs of outwards/inwards and modern/traditional respectively, permeates the analysis as they condition discursive and social practice of support and opposition.

In the following chapters I use these concepts to discuss the construction of support and opposition, and how discursive practices are used. But before I do that the main characters of the merger process need to be introduced.
Chapter 5 – Presentation of characters and case

I start this chapter by giving a brief overview of the merger process and some key points in time. After that I give a somewhat more detailed description of the three university colleges involved in the merger process. This is the stage on which the construction of support and opposition unfolded.

Buskerud, Vestfold and Østfold are three counties surrounding the Oslofjord in the south-east part of Norway. Each county has its own university college, named after the county. For brevity I refer to Buskerud University College as Buskerud, Vestfold University College as Vestfold, and Østfold University College as Østfold. The context usually makes it clear whether it is the university college or the county I refer to, where that is not the case I state explicitly which I refer to. Together with The Norwegian University of Life Sciences located in the county of Akershus, the three university colleges formed an alliance in 2007 called the Oslofjord Alliance. The intention of the alliance was to cooperate on educational programmes. In 2008 initial discussions concerning a merger were conducted. In October 2008 the board at Vestfold made a formal decision to instigate a dialog with the other partners in the alliance. This dialog was a first step towards investigating the possibility of a merger. This can be viewed as initiating a move on the continuum of inter-institutional cooperation (Lang, 2002, p. 158). Buskerud followed up with the same decision in November 2008, and Østfold did the same in February 2009.

University colleges constitute the non-university part of the binary system of the Norwegian higher education sector. I am aware of the confusion the term university college might cause. The official English translation used by non-university higher education institutions, which in Norway is University Colleges, differs in different countries and different higher education systems.

The fourth partner in the Oslofjord Alliance – The Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU) – reaffirmed their intentions to continue institutionally committed relationship within the alliance in accordance with previous agreements, but declined to participate in any form of merger investigation due to a pending merger with the Norwegian School of Veterinary Science. In other words, they already had their hands full with an ongoing forced merger. This meant that three of the four partners in the Oslofjord Alliance were ready
to initiate an investigation of a merger process, while the fourth decided to sit this one out.

As a result of the decision to investigate the possibility of a merger, a formal inquiry was conducted. This resulted in the report “A comprehensive view II” in early March 2010. The report was named after the governmental report “A comprehensive view” from 2008 that concluded with a suggestion of restructuring Norwegian higher education through a series of forced mergers (NOU 2008:3, 2008). The report created some turmoil at the time because although there was political support for the suggestion of a restructured higher education ending with fewer and larger higher education institutions, there was no political support for the idea of forcing them to merge. All mergers would be encouraged by the Ministry of Education, but they had to be voluntary. The merger initiative from Buskerud, Vestfold and Østfold was a voluntary initiative, although there was political pressure involved in the shape of policy intentions. The report was circulated for consultation to internal and external consultative bodies. Based on the consultative statements, in June 2010 the boards at Buskerud and Vestfold recommended that the three university colleges continue their work with the aim to merge the three university colleges into one institution. I analyse the report “A comprehensive view II” more thoroughly in chapter 6.

The board at Østfold came to the conclusion that based on internal consultative statements more inquiry was needed before a decision could be made whether they should continue the process or not. A workgroup was set up to explore alternative options to a merger and any potential consequences of such a decision. The report “Østfold University College’s institutional cooperation – a study of alternatives to merging with Buskerud University College and Vestfold University College” was completed in September 2010. Based on the two reports, the board at Østfold University College made the same decision in November 2010 as Buskerud and Vestfold had done in June 2010, which was to recommend that the three university colleges continued the process with the aim of merging into one institution by 1 January 2013. I analyse the report “Østfold University College’s institutional cooperation – a study of alternatives to merging with Buskerud University College and Vestfold University College” with its consultative statements more thoroughly in chapter 7.
The next step was to set up a meeting with the Ministry of Education, which took place in December 2010. Here the three university colleges submitted an application to continue the investigation process with an intention to merge. The application was sanctioned by the Ministry, and in February 2011 the three boards decided on a program statement. This statement included an agreement on the conditions for completion of the merger process and a mandate for further assessment work. A plan for the project organisation, and a schedule were also included in the statement, as well as an agreement on participation and reorganisation, and a plan for budget and finance. This was the starting point for a more formal and thorough process of investigation. A steering committee for the merger process was established, with the following members from each university college: Rector, external board member, internal board member, student leader, University College Director, and a representative from the unions. The rectors and directors formed a small group that acted as a preparatory body for the steering committee. The steering committee set up a project organisation with project secretariat, workgroups and academic groups.

Five reports were compiled in the areas of 1) Vision, academic profile and strategic objectives, 2) Governance and management structure, 3) External cooperation, 4) Academic organisation and 5) Administrative organisation. When the reports were completed they were sent for consultation to internal stakeholders in the three university colleges. All reports were finalised, sent on hearing, and consultative statements produced during the fall of 2011. In addition, an administrative project that studied and prepared certain administrative operations of the transition to a merged university college was undertaken. There was also a name process organised by the project secretariat to determine what the new university college was to be called. Towards the end of November 2011 the progress halted. There were indications of increased resistance at Østfold. A due diligence report created a great deal of turmoil in this period. Østfold wanted to perform a due diligence. Buskerud and Vestfold did not see the need for that, arguing that all economic aspects were already publicly available. Østfold insisted on doing the due diligence and ended up paying for it themselves. The result of the due diligence, and the way the financial situation of Buskerud and Vestfold was analysed by Østfold led to a strained relationship between Østfold on the one side and the other two university colleges on the other. I analyse the due-diligence report more
thoroughly in chapter 8 together with the report “Vision, academic profile and strategic objectives” with its consultative statements.

The situation led to uncertainty at Buskerud and Vestfold whether Østfold was still interested in a merger. On that basis, the rectors and chairs at Buskerud and Vestfold sent a letter to the board at Østfold University College on 11 January 2012, where they asked them to clarify their position in relation to previous decisions. This letter became known as the “note of concern”. In their reply 16 January 2012 the board at Østfold underlined that previous decisions remained unchanged, and that they wanted to complete the merger investigation process through good and constructive cooperation. They also pointed out certain issues that needed to be addressed before a final decision could be made. These issues concerned 1) Ownership of future PhD programmes and progress of the university ambition, 2) Employee commitment was reduced, and constituted a challenge for all three university colleges, and 3) Economic issues.

In February 2012 the report “The organisation of a merged university college” was written by the three rectors. It was sent out for consultation to a number of internal and external bodies. Deadline for consultative statements was 5 March 2012. On 13 March 2012 a press release was sent out stating that the merger process had been terminated. The boards at the three university colleges formally decided to cancel the merger process 29 March 2012. The process had come to an abrupt end with the result that a merger would not take place. As a result of this decision, Buskerud and Vestfold decided to continue the merger process while Østfold decided to continue as an independent university college. I analyse the note of concern, the response to the note of concern, and the report “The organisation of a merged university college” with its consultative statements more thoroughly in chapter 9.

This is a very brief overview of the merger process. In the following chapters I am going to focus on some of the reports produced and their adhering consultative statements. Together with data collected through my interviews I will try to untangle the discourses of support and opposition and how they were used during the merger process. But before going in-depth I present a timeline (Table 5.1) that can be useful in the orientation of when different events occurred. This chapter also gives a short description of each university college.
### Table 5.1. Timeline for the merger process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>October 2008</td>
<td>The board at Vestfold decides to initiate a dialog with the three other institutions in the Oslofjord Alliance in order to investigate the foundation for a possible merger of the four institutions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2008</td>
<td>The board at Buskerud decides to initiate a dialog with the three other institutions in the Oslofjord Alliance in order to investigate the foundation for a possible merger of the four institutions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2008</td>
<td>The Norwegian University of Life Science (UMB) confirms their intentions to continue the collaboration within the Oslofjord Alliance, but they do not wish to participate in a pre-merger investigation due to their pending merger with The Norwegian School of Veterinary Science (NVH).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2009</td>
<td>The board at Østfold decides to initiate a dialog with the other institutions in the Oslofjord Alliance in order to investigate the foundation for a possible merger of the four institutions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2009</td>
<td>The boards at Buskerud, Vestfold and Østfold agree to initiate an investigation on the possibilities for tighter and binding institutional cooperation, including an evaluation of the possibility of merging the three university colleges.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2010</td>
<td>The report “A Comprehensive View II” is completed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2010</td>
<td>The boards at Buskerud and Vestfold agree to continue the process with the specific goal to merge into one institution no later than 1 January 2013.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 September 2010</td>
<td>The report “Østfold University College’s institutional cooperation – investigation of alternatives to merging with Buskerud University College and Vestfold University College” is completed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 October 2010</td>
<td>Consultative statement regarding the investigation of Østfold’s institutional cooperation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 November 2010</td>
<td>The board at Østfold agree to continue the process with the specific goal to merge into one institution no later than 1 January 2013.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2010</td>
<td>Application to continue the process is submitted to the Ministry of Education and Research (ME).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2011</td>
<td>The boards at the three university colleges agree on the platform for further investigation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 June 2011</td>
<td>Reports from workgroups one “Vision, academic profile and strategic objectives” and two “Governance and management structure” are completed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ultimo August 2011</td>
<td>Consultancy statements concerning report from workgroup one is completed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ultimo August 2011</td>
<td>Consultancy statement concerning report from workgroup two is completed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 September 2011</td>
<td>Report from workgroup four “Academic organisation” is completed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 October 2011</td>
<td>Reports from workgroups three “External cooperation” and five “Administrative organisation” are completed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ultimo October 2011</td>
<td>Consultancy statements concerning report from workgroup four is completed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ultimo November 2011</td>
<td>Consultancy statements concerning report from research group three are completed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ultimo November 2011</td>
<td>Consultancy statements concerning report from research group five are completed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 January 2012</td>
<td>Note of concern from Buskerud and Vestfold to Østfold about the work on the merger investigation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 January 2012</td>
<td>Østfold responds to the note of concern.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 January 2012</td>
<td>Presentation of case “A financial review regarding the possible merger between the university colleges of Buskerud, Vestfold and Østfold” compiled by Østfold on the background of the Due diligence report.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 February 2012</td>
<td>Letter from the Ministry of Education and Research regarding the financial analysis made by Østfold.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 February 2012</td>
<td>Final report “The organisation of a merged university college” is distributed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 March 2012</td>
<td>Deadline for consultative statements on the final report.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 March 2012</td>
<td>A press release is sent out from the rectors at the three university colleges stating that the merger process is terminated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 March 2012</td>
<td>The boards at the three university colleges formally agree to cancel the merger process.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The three University Colleges**

Three university colleges took part in the merger process: Buskerud University College (Buskerud), located in the county of Buskerud; Vestfold University College (Vestfold), located in the county of Vestfold; Østfold University College (Østfold), located in the county of Østfold. The map in Figure 5.1 shows the counties of southern Norway. This section is primarily based on the attachment to the report “A comprehensive view II” produced in March 2010.
Buskerud University College (Buskerud)

Buskerud was the smallest of the three partners with a total student number of 3204. At the time the merger process started it had five faculties on three campuses (Table 5.2) in three different cities (Drammen, Kongsberg and Hønefoss). The Faculty of Health Science was located in Drammen, the Faculty of Education was located in Drammen and Hønefoss, the Faculty of Technology was located in Kongsberg, and the Faculty of Business and Social Science was located in Drammen, Hønefoss and Kongsberg. Further, the Faculty of Optometry was located in Drammen and Kongsberg. The three campuses had about the same number of students (Drammen 1139, Kongsberg 1060, Hønefoss 1005). Most study programmes were vocational. Buskerud’s Rector was appointed and therefore the chair of the board was an external representative.
Table 5.2. Campus, faculties and students in Buskerud.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Campus</th>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Drammen</td>
<td>Business and Social Science</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Health Science</td>
<td>720</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Optometry</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kongsberg</td>
<td>Business and Social Science</td>
<td>351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Optometry</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>457</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ringerike (Hønefoss)</td>
<td>Business and Social science</td>
<td>662</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3204</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Vestfold University College (Vestfold)

In the period 1994 – 2009 Vestfold consisted of five faculties but in the fall of 2010 it was reorganised into four faculties (Table 5.3). When the merger process started Vestfold had recently been reorganised into one campus at Bakkenteigen outside the city of Horten. The total number of students was 3871. After the organisational restructuring in 2010 the four faculties were the Faculty of Humanities and Education, the Faculty of Health Science, the Faculty of Business and Social Science, and the Faculty of Technology and Maritime Science. Most of the study programmes were vocational. Vestfold had an elected Rector who also functioned as the chair of the board.

Table 5.3. Campus, faculties and students in Vestfold.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Campus</th>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bakkenteigen</td>
<td>Business and Social science</td>
<td>774</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Health Science</td>
<td>681</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>1512</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maritime Science</td>
<td>346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>558</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3871</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Østfold University College (Østfold)

Østfold was the largest of the three partners in terms of students with a total number of 3956, divided into two campuses (Table 5.4), one in Fredrikstad (1639) and the other in Halden (2317). It was organised into five faculties and one academy called “The Norwegian Theatre Academy”. The Norwegian Theatre Academy, the Faculty of Health and Social Studies, and the Faculty of Engineering were located in Fredrikstad. The Faculty of Computer Science, the Faculty of Education, and the Faculty of Business, Languages, and Social Sciences were located in Halden. Most of the study programmes were vocational. Østfold had an elected rector who also functioned as the chair of the board.

Table 5.4. Campus, faculties and students in Østfold.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Campus</th>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fredrikstad</td>
<td>Health and Social Studies</td>
<td>1161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>448</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Norwegian Theatre Academy</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halden</td>
<td>Business, Languages and Social</td>
<td>910</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sciences</td>
<td>1073</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Computer Science</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5 + 1</td>
<td>3956</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The total number of campuses for all the three merger partners was six (Table 5.5). The total number of faculties was sixteen. The total number of students was around eleven thousand.

Table 5.5. Campus, faculties and students in the three university colleges.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Buskerud</th>
<th>Vestfold</th>
<th>Østfold</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Campus</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculties</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5 + 1</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>3204</td>
<td>3871</td>
<td>3956</td>
<td>11031</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The three university colleges had a range of academic areas, some of them overlapping and some specific for one university college (Table 5.6).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Buskerud</th>
<th>Vestfold</th>
<th>Østfold</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health education</td>
<td>Teacher training</td>
<td>Health education</td>
<td>Health and social studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher training</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Teacher training</td>
<td>Teacher training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Business and</td>
<td>Maritime science</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business and</td>
<td>leadership</td>
<td>Natural science and engineering</td>
<td>Computer science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>leadership</td>
<td>Political science and human rights</td>
<td>Social science</td>
<td>Business, languages and social sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optometry</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Acting and scenography</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All three university colleges are medium size institutions. Østfold is Norway’s seventh largest university college in relation to the number of registered students. Vestfold is number eight and Buskerud number eleven. All three university colleges have vocational educations in nursing, teacher training and engineering.

**The project organisation**
A steering committee was set up to formally oversee the project. It consisted of the three rectors, three external board members, three internal board members, the three administrative directors, three union representatives, three student representatives and a secretary. A project secretariat was also set up consisting of the three human resource managers and the three chief communication officers. Five workgroups were established. These groups were set up with a number of participants from each of the three merger partners. Their purpose was to produce reports that would serve as a base for the final report. The final report would serve as a foundation on which a decision to merge or not would be made. Each group had a specific target of investigation. The first group focused on vision, academic profile and strategic objectives. The second group was responsible for governance and management structure. The third took care of external cooperation. The fourth focused on academic
organisation, and the fifth was responsible for producing a report on the administrative organisation.

Summary
In this chapter my intention has been to give a backdrop of the events that occurred in the merger process. I started with a brief description of the merger process to show where different events took place including a timeline. I then gave a short overview of the three university colleges involved in the merger process. The number of campuses and students played a part in the construction of discourse. The faculty structure is also worth taking notice of as location of faculty leadership and the development of PhD programmes were central aspects in the discursive practices of support and opposition. It is now time to get down to business. The following four chapters are structured as acts in a play. Each act involves reports and other forms of events that occurred in the time-period each act is centred around. From a starting point where seemingly all three merger partners agreed on the merger process, we will follow the progress over time and see how discourses evolved, changed and became dominant.
PART TWO – THE MERGER PROCESS
In this part I present four acts divided into four chapters. In the first act – initiation – the merger process is initiated and the first report produced. This is the act where the decision to continue the merger process or not is being made. However, Østfold University College are not sure whether they want to participate in a further merger investigation and ask if they can postpone their decision. The second act – hesitation – revolves around Østfold’s uncertainty. However, after completing a report on the matter, they too decide to carry on with the merger process. The third act – investigation – focuses on the continued merger process, the development of reports and how things start to change between the merger partners. In the fourth and final act – termination – it becomes clear that the merger is not viable. Part two ends with the termination of the merger process.
Chapter 6 – Act one: Initiation (– March 2010)

In this act, I will discuss the events in the period leading up to March 2010. As we already know, the main characters in the merger process are the university colleges of Buskerud, Vestfold and Østfold. The Oslofjord Alliance including The Norwegian University of Life Science has been in operation since 2007. The next step was to investigate whether a more formal form of cooperation was possible. Talks of a merger started to spread and the time was right to see if the partners were ready to take the alliance to the next level. The focal point in this act is the first formal report produced by Buskerud, Vestfold and Østfold together. The intention of the report was to see whether initiating a merger process would be possible or not.

Report – A comprehensive view II

The report “A comprehensive view II” was the first report in the merger process. It was compiled by a project group consisting of members from all three university colleges. It was completed in March 2010 and named after the report “A comprehensive view” presented by the Stjernø commission in 2008 (NOU 2008:3, 2008).

Four members from each university college made the total number twelve in in the project group. The groups from Østfold and Buskerud consisted of one leader from academic staff, one leader from administrations, one union representative and one student representative. Instead of a representative from the administration, Vestfold was represented with two leaders from academic staff in addition to a union and a student representative. The aim of the investigation report was to “give the boards at the three university colleges a foundation on which to consider further institutional cooperation and a possible merger” (p. 10). The project group’s task was to evaluate what could be achieved by a merger, and which not could be achieved within the existing cooperation structure of the Oslofjord Alliance.

The report begins with an abstract describing the purpose of the report as a means of investigating the possibilities of closer cooperation for Buskerud, Vestfold and Østfold including evaluating a possible merger between the three. The project group responsible for the report underlined the fact that the Oslofjord Alliance had shown that the three university colleges had great potential for cooperation opportunities. The Oslofjord Alliance was an alliance
between the three university colleges of Buskerud, Vestfold, Østfold, and The Norwegian University of Life Science. They also pointed to the fact that the education sector is undergoing change with increased demands on academic quality, research activity and more collaboration, division of labour and consolidation. Higher education institutions therefore need to adapt through constant change and development. This line of arguments relates to the strategy of collaboration, division of labour and consolidation (SAK), and to the Stjernø-report concluding that mergers are a necessity in order to prepare for increased demands in the sector. The way in which the report “A comprehensive view II” was written coincides with a discourse of education market. This is not surprising since it was influenced by the Stjernø report, which in turn was heavily influenced by discourses of education market and academic drift. What is done in the report “A comprehensive view II” is presenting a worldview were change is inevitable. It is a necessary step to take in order to “meet demands”. These demands are competition from other higher education institutions as well as expectations from the Ministry of Education concerning efficiency and quality. Using the concepts introduced in my conceptual framework the report can be described as outwards and modern. And as I have described earlier these were concepts used in the construction of support.

The question of university ambition was an important aspect in the report, although it was presented in a somewhat ambiguous way. The introduction chapter referred to a note written by the three rectors. This note was part of an appendix accompanying the report. What this note stated was that “we wish to develop the three university colleges into a multi-campus university” (p. 7). The purpose of the merger was here clearly described as a means to achieve the goal of university status. This goal was going to be obtained by “identifying academic areas for mutual PhD programmes” (p. 7).

Thus, this statement pointed to another big issue in the merger process, namely PhD programmes. To apply for university status a university college needs to (among other criteria) have at least four PhD programmes in operation. The idea of becoming a university is therefore closely connected to the operationalisation of developing PhD programmes. In other words: why they should merge is to achieve university status, and how this is to be achieved is through the development of PhD programmes. The phrasing also reveals what would later evolve into one of the issues in the antagonism
between the support and the opposition discourse. Using the word “identifying” suggests that the academic areas for mutual PhD programmes had not yet been identified, and in consequence there had not been a decision on what PhD programmes should be developed. This understanding was further emphasised by the use of the word “mutual”. The message conveyed through this text is that the identification of PhD programmes would be done together, including all three university colleges. However, as we will discover later, different interpretations of statements like this conditioned the development of a support and an opposition discourse.

The report stated that “the investigation work is conducted with the Rector’s visions and ambitions as a backdrop” (p. 8). These visions and ambitions were the plan to become a university and confirm that the idea of the merger was to achieve university status. References to this ambition occurred in a number of places in the report. On page 10 it was stated that one of the questions the investigation was meant to clarify was “how a possible merger can contribute to the development of a university that will strengthen research and the study programmes”. In the section “Guidelines” (p. 11) the workgroup was expected to comment on “challenges regarding the development towards a university”. The workgroup was not expected to give a definite answer to the university ambition but they claimed that “it is difficult to have a debate about a merger as a strategic and structural move without linking it to the university ambition” (p. 15). The university ambition was therefore closely intertwined with the merger rationale. Separating the investigation of a merger from a university ambition was seen as difficult. This became even clearer when it was stated in the report that “even though the present report does not go directly into the university ambition itself, the final recommendation would probably include this as a backdrop” (p. 15).

These few examples indicate how the university ambition had a constant presence in the report. Despite that constant presence it was not explicitly written in the report that university status was a merger goal. Instead words like “backdrop” and “contribute” were used to downplay its pivotal importance in the merger process. The three university colleges had described the question of university ambition differently in their long-term strategic plans:

Buskerud University College has as main objective to become a university in cooperation with others before 2015. Vestfold University College shall, in
cooperation with the other institutions in the Oslofjord Alliance, develop into a university. Østfold University College has no explicit goal of becoming a university in their strategic plan (p. 28).

The difference in university ambition was very clear, as these strategic plans had been developed long before the merger process started. Sharing mutual goal is considered one of the most important factors of a successful merger (Skodvin, 1999). Rather than escalating this potential problem and make it a make-or-break decision at this early stage, it was downplayed in the text:

In summary, it must be said that the ambitions of the strategic plans are largely homogeneous - although there may be individual elements that are only mentioned in one of the plans. The most relevant difference in this context is the different weighting of the ambition of being part of a university (p. 29).

The use of the word “weighting” indicates a differentiation on a scale. In this context it indicates to what degree one subscribes to the university ambition. To “weight” something it must be present in the first place. You cannot put “weight” on something that does not exist, and in this case there was no university ambition in Østfold’s strategic plan. Although it was not stated in the report, the use of “weighting” may be caused by individuals at Østfold supporting the idea to become a university. Weighting can also refer to the difference between seeing university status as premise or a consequence of a merger.

The report had a separate chapter discussing academic organisation. There was an emphasis on the need for a thorough investigation of how the merged institution should be organised. It was argued that the motivation of the three university colleges to merge would largely be based on a desire of academic development, both in width with robust undergraduate programmes, and in depth with research groups and PhD programmes. This would in itself be of great value for all three university colleges, it was argued, especially considering attaining university status for the merged organisation. There was an underlying assumption that university status was what drove the merger process and thereby how the new organisation should be organised. It was stated that:
One must relatively quickly agree on academic structure, to point out a direction for the long-term process, particularly with a view to achieving university status for the merged institution (p. 48).

By framing the chapter round a notion of university status, the previous example shows how the merged institution might be organised; it is set with university status in mind. The message conveyed was that when academic organisation is discussed, it should always be with university status in mind. This argumentation follows the line from earlier parts in the report where university status is seen as a “backdrop” for the report. The idea of becoming a university was what guided the operationalisation of that idea. Thus, the idea took precedence over operationalisation.

In the report it was stated that most mergers in higher education are motivated by a strengthening of academic milieus, by increasing education quality, increasing research activity and improving recruitment of students and staff. It was also stated that experience from previous mergers had shown no reduction in costs, and that there was no intention of economy of scale in this project. On the contrary, there was recognition of short to medium term increased costs. However, in the final report “The organisation of a merged university college” written by the three rectors in February 2012, there was an ambition to save costs as a result of the merger (see Act four – Termination).

In the report the fact that a future realisation of the university ambition would demand increased costs was acknowledged. Funding requirements would depend on academic ambitions and number of doctoral programmes to be developed. The workgroup recommended that strategic choices should be made at an early stage in terms of what academic areas one wished to prioritise when it came to the development of doctoral programmes and costs related to the realisation of them. It was stated that individual faculties at the three university colleges in recent years had built up expertise with a goal to set up a doctoral programme. The PhD programme at Vestfold in the field of maritime technology (engineering) was mentioned in the report, but programmes under development at Buskerud and Vestfold were not mentioned. In the appendix it was mentioned that Buskerud University College was developing a PhD programme in health science (p. 245 in the appendix). When the conveyed message in the report was that academic areas in which to develop PhD programme needed to be identified, and at the same time a PhD programme
was already under development, the tension between the three partners increased. The message in the report that a strategic decision regarding the development of PhD programmes was urgent implied that a decision had not yet been made. The question of where and what PhD programmes should be developed could be construed as still open. The development of PhD programmes later became one of the big areas of conflict, both in terms of development and location. Nowhere in the report was it explicitly written which faculties were developing PhD programmes and in what academic fields. The only written confirmation of a PhD programme under development was in the appendix.

The text in the report was based on an outwards perspective in which higher education institutions are seen to operate in an education market. Change must be understood as adaptations to continuously changing demands from society and students. The market discourse is based on seeing education as a competitive advantage in a global market. If high-cost nations like Norway cannot compete with low-cost nations in terms of producing consumables, machines and other products, they need to be competitive in terms of knowledge. Education is seen as a key factor in securing an innovative and competitive private sector as well as developing a competent and efficient public sector. A consequence is that more students should take higher education as well as graduate degrees. The market discourse in the report was consistent with the content in the Stjernø report from 2008 (NOU 2008:3, 2008). Several paragraphs were direct citations from that report and they were used as examples to support a market discourse. Again the report consisted of quotes from the rector note in the appendix stating that “the domestic and international competition for higher education and research challenges the institutions in Norway” (p. 7). This is quite clearly inspired by the market discourse permeating the Stjernø-report and exemplified in descriptions like “the competition for students, staff, research funds and cooperation partners is continuously enhanced” (NOU 2008:3, 2008, p. 15). The reuse of texts in other texts is what Fairclough (1992, p. 102) refers to as intertextuality. The way text from the report “A comprehensive view” was reused in the report confirms ideological similarities of the two reports. Even the name of the report was almost the same.

In the report a worldview where a merger is necessary to achieve university status was depicted. University status was important in order to be competitive
in a globalised market. It was a necessary response to changes where knowledge is seen as the prime competitive advantage in the future. The market discourse is tightly intertwined with the perception of the knowledge society and as such linked to academic drift.

The report ended with conclusions and recommendations. The project group concluded that the higher education sector is changing, both nationally and internationally. They agreed there are increased demands on academic quality. There is a need for increased research activity and for more collaboration, division of labour and consolidation. One could also expect an increase in competition for students, staff and research funding. The project group was divided into a majority and a minority in their recommendation of continuing the process of investigating the possibility for a merger. The majority, consisting of members from all three university colleges, referred to the necessity of increased academic cooperation in order to meet challenges the three university colleges were facing in the future. They argued that:

A merger will, in a better way than cooperation models, be able to meet the three university colleges’ ambitions of academic development, with the possible aim of achieving university status (p. 65).

It was the idea of becoming a university that drove the urge to merge. It was argued that other forms of cooperation had proven vulnerable and instable over time. Costs associated with merger investigation and implementation was considered “modest in relation to the gains one can achieve”. On the basis of those arguments the majority of the project group recommended the university colleges of Buskerud, Vestfold and Østfold to enter into a merger process.

The project group’s minority, which consisted of members from Buskerud and Østfold, was of the opposite opinion that the:

Costs of entering into a merger process will exceed the potential positive effects in relation to the overarching ambitions (p. 66).

They were of the opinion that a merger with the ambitions to achieve university status would require a significant increase in competence for teaching and research staff. A consequence would be a transfer of resources
from primary activity (bachelor level programmes) to other activities. While the majority of the project group pointed out that a merger would open up the possibility of becoming a university, and described costs in relation to the merger investigation and implementation as modest, the minority argued that it was not worth it. The main reason was that resources would be moved away from undergraduate programmes and into the doctoral programmes.

Already in this first report the discursive construction of support and opposition is in operation. The support discourse was rooted in the university ambition. University ambition was the primary driver for the merger, although it was not yet very salient in the text. One example is the chapter on academic organisation where university status is the backdrop for the whole chapter. It was argued that when planning for how the new university college should be organised one should always have the university ambition in mind. In the opposition discourse, on the other hand, operationalising factors were used as arguments. Resources from primary activities would be removed, there would be a more complicated organisation, there would be more levels of administration and there would be more need for resources. What drove the opposition discourse was the operationalisation of the idea. The university college’s geographical location on each side of the Oslofjord was also pointed out as a challenge. The minority group did not explicitly state that they regarded the university ambition as a bad idea, but the costs of implementing that idea were not justified.

Based on the report the boards at Buskerud and Vestfold agreed to continue the process with the specific goal to merge into one institution no later than 1 January 2013. Østfold needed more time before they could make a decision and asked that they could investigate alternatives to a merger with Buskerud and Vestfold. Buskerud and Vestfold agreed to that and as a result the report “Østfold University College’s institutional cooperation – investigation of alternatives to merging with Buskerud University College and Vestfold University College” was produced during the summer of 2010 and completed in September 2010.

The understanding of the merger process

At this point I would like to introduce one of the discursive ruptures in the merger process. As I have described earlier, ruptures point to conflicts or destabilisation. Ruptures can also be described as conjunctures (Chouliarakis &
Fairclough, 1999, p. 22), or practices changing the path of a merger process. The way the report was written it was not consistently clear whether it should be regarded as a base for making a decision to merge or not, or a decision to continue the merger investigation or not with the aim of merger:

It is important to emphasise that any decision to work towards a merger should be followed up by a number of studies, aiming to find concrete and lasting solutions for the new institution. If the university college boards recommend merger and it is approved by the Ministry, the new institution needs to be developed simultaneously with ordinary business operations. An important part of the implementation strategy will be to develop an investigation process (p. 67).

Both understandings are represented in my data. The two understandings of what the intention of the merger process was all about can be traced back to this initial report. The first understanding was to see this report as the foundation on which a decision whether to merge or not should be made. If the boards agreed to continue the process on the basis of this report it would be on the condition of going through with the merger. The following process would therefore be a process of finding the best way of organising the new university college. The process was considered an exercise in how to determine the organisational structure of the new university college. Even though the formal decision to merge was to be taken by the boards of directors at the three university colleges at the end of the pre-merger phase, this was perceived as a technicality. From this perspective a de facto decision to merge was made when the formal project organisation was established and it was decided to continue the merger process. How the process progressed from that point was in accordance to an underlying understanding that the university colleges would merge. To question this was seen as counterproductive. A manager at Buskerud explained:

We, or at least I, entered the merger process with the words of our chair of the board in mind: the arguments for not merging have been discussed and are done with; now we look for implementation and the resources will be used on how we can do it in the best possible way.

(Manager, Buskerud University College)

The personal form used by the manager emphasises the commitment he has to this matter. He knows that he articulates the official opinion of his university college when quoting the chair of the board at Buskerud, making it easier to
flag his own opinion. When I interviewed the chair of the board at Buskerud he elaborated on this:

Researcher: To what extent have you thought that this merger process was based on an understanding that we should merge, we will investigate the best way to achieve this, compared to we're going to investigate to see if we will merge or not?

Respondent: Yes, it's a good question. I think it was the first. We had agreed that there is so much we have in common, that we should come up with a suggestion to what the merged university college should look like. Implicitly there is a decision to merge, not vice versa that we should come up with a foundation on which we will decide whether to merge or not [...]. It was not a question if we should facilitate a merger. It was a question of how to facilitate a merger.

(Chair of the board, Buskerud University College)

Of course he was aware of the fact that a formal decision to merge is to be made after the pre-merger\(^6\) phase and if one of the parties did not feel that the outcome of the process was satisfying, then they were free to withdraw from the process. However, what is interesting is the construction of meaning about how resources were meant to be used – in finding the best way to implement the merger.

The other understanding of the merger process was to see the report as a foundation for continuing the process or not. It was not seen as a merger decision. The merger decision would come at a later stage, when the final report had been produced. It would be on the basis of that report the decision to merge or not was to be made. The disparity between the two worldviews becomes apparent when a member of the board at Østfold talks about the rationale behind the merger process:

What we unanimously said yes to was the clarification of the conditions and consequences of the merger. To me it was always clear that I said yes to clarification, not to the merger.

(Member of the board, Østfold University College)

---

\(^6\) Others have labelled the pre-merger phase as the phase after the decision to merge has been made but the public announcement and all legal issues have not yet taken place. See for example Appelbaum, Gandell, Yortis, Proper, & Jobin (2000).
If the process did not lead to a wanted result it was perceived legitimate to turn down the merger. Whether one shared the worldview of saying yes or no to a merger, or the worldview of saying yes or no to a merger process, the event in itself was the same. The discursive construction of meaning of this event was linked to the discourses of support and opposition. The understanding of the report as a foundation for deciding whether to merge or not coincided with the support discourse, while the understanding of the report as a foundation for deciding whether to continue the merger process or not coincided with the opposition discourse.

We can use an example where marriage was used as a metaphor to illustrate the different constructions of meaning of what the merger process was about. The marriage metaphor is often used about mergers (Goedegebuure, 1992, p. 70) and it is:

Extremely apposite in communicating the perceived consequential importance, emotionality and difficulties which parties to every merger and acquisition face (Cartwright & Cooper, 1993, p. 2).

Just as couples enter into marriages full of hope and good cheer, businesses enter into mergers, acquisitions, joint ventures and partnerships full of optimism and plans for a rosy future (Schmidt, 2002, p. ix). However, different discursive practices construct different understandings of commitment and control:

My opinion is that when three institutions have entered into an engagement, which we did in December 2010, the Ministry [of Education] should have managed the implementation phase with much more force. That’s my opinion. It’s absurd to spend such a lot of time and effort and taxpayers’ money without any result. It cannot continue like that. At the point of engagement the Ministry should have overridden the boards.

(Manager, Vestfold University College)

The manager refers to the decision to continue the merger process in December 2010 as the “engagement”. According to him an engagement is a binding commitment not to be broken. It is suggested that the Ministry of Education should have overridden the boards’ decision to terminate the merger process and instead forced a merger. He argues that a merger should have been done because such a lot of “taxpayers’ money” has been spent. The money spent is a sunk cost and it could be argued that money spent should not
be considered relevant in making rational choices. However, in this case it is considered a commitment and therefore “the Ministry should have overridden the boards”.

In this quote, engagement is viewed as a point of no return. A de facto decision to merge was in this case made when the decision to continue the merger process was made in December 2010. The pre-merger phase, according to this discursive practice, was about finding the best way of organising the merged university college. This stands in sharp contrast to the construction of meaning that the pre-merger phase was about finding out whether one should merge or not.

To illustrate how different stages in a merger process can be compared with those of a relationship, I use a figure from Eastman and Lang (2001) (Figure 6.1) and a figure with suggested stages in a relationship (Figure 6.2).

![Figure 6.1. Stages in the process of merger (Eastman & Lang, 2001, p. 103).](image)

There are three basic stages of a merger. In the first stage there are negotiations between the merger partners. When a decision to merge has been made the merger partners enter the transition stage where plans are made and the merger is prepared. When the actual merger is realised, the merger partners enter the implementation stage as a single new legal entity. If we
compare this figure to a figure of stages in the process of marriage it may look something like this:

![Figure 6.2. Stages in the process of marriage.](image)

Just like a merger, a process of getting married can be described as going through three different stages. The first stage starts when two people meet and start dating. When a proposal has been made they enter the engagement stage where plans are made and the wedding is prepared. After the date of the actual wedding the happy couple enter the marriage stage as a single new legal entity.

Following the line of reasoning that I used describing these two figures, the decision to merge is located at the same point as the decision to get married. In this case this is the point of “agreement reached” and “proposal made” respectively. The engagement period in this case starts after a decision to “join forces” has been made. This way of understanding the merger process stands in contrast to the way the metaphor is used in the quote above. Engagement, in this case, refers to a commitment based on the decision to continue the merger process. This was the point of “Discussions begin” and “Courting begins” respectively. In other words, according to the respondent, the engagement started in December 2010 when the decision to continue the merger process was made. This example shows how discursive practice of support used
metaphors to construct a “truth” of having committed oneself to a merger (marriage) already in December 2010.

Ambition
The central document in the first act was the report described above. At this point I would like to take the opportunity to discuss another rupture, one of the main issues in the report – and in the whole merger process for that matter – namely the ambition to become a university.

University status as a premise for a merger
At this stage there was no consensus of what the merger objective was. In the report there was an underlying assumption that university status was a premise for the merger. This assumption also permeated the dominant discourse of support at Buskerud and Vestfold. They had an explicit goal to become a university. The university ambition had been a part of their strategic plan since 2005–2006. Østfold on the other hand did not have a strategic plan that included ambitions to seek university status. However, although Østfold did not have university status as part of their strategic plan there were of course individuals and groups there too who supported the ambition to become a university.

There was a difference in the construction of ambition between seeing university status as a premise for a merger, or a consequence of a merger. I discuss the latter in chapter 8. In both cases the idea of achieving university status was supported but what differed was the focus of the discursive practices on either idea or operationalisation. In the case where university status was seen as a premise for a merger, focus was on the idea, and when university status was seen as a consequence, focus was on operationalisation.

University status as a premise for a merger was driven by an ideological idea of education market and academic drift. Operationalisation in the form of means to achieve university status was in this case considered subordinate to the idea. Here a manager at Vestfold talks about how the idea should be in focus and not the operationalisation of the idea:

As a consequence of this [lack of shared university ambition] there came to be an exaggerated focus on administrative, technical and financial aspects. Well, this project is about, how shall I put it, it is an important professional strategic move, and that should be the basis for whether one merges or doesn’t merge. Not whether
The construction of meaning in this quote is based on the dichotomy of idea and operationalisation. The merger is described here as an important, professional, strategic move. It is based on an idea, and that idea is to become a university. This idea should be the basis for the decision to merge or not. That is what the “project is about” according to the respondent. Here operationalisation was dichotomised as inferior to the idea – described as “details”. However, when the idea of university ambition was not shared, focus shifted to operationalisation.

**Opposing the idea of university status**

There is a fine line between supporting university status as a consequence and supporting a merger but not university status. However, they are two very different constructions of meaning conditioned by different ideologies. When university status is opposed at the same time as a merger is not, it can be seen as an acceptance of a market discourse but not the discourse of academic drift. More precisely it is the traditional perspective of the non-university sector that is constructed as an ideal. A good university college is in this case considered “better” than a new university. A merger can be justified on the grounds that larger higher education institutions are more robust and better suited to provide education and research. However, university status symbolises a shift away from what a university college’s core activity is. By becoming a university the organisation is considered too top-heavy in research. This does not mean a rejection of research per se, but rather how one fears the balance between teaching and research is going to be. Nor is it a rejection of academic drift per se. It is more a question of how far academic drift should be accepted to go. Thus, academic drift is not a question of a dichotomised either or, but a continuum between two extreme positions.

In the higher education sector today few, if any, higher education institutions do not engage in research. In that case they would violate the policy-induced demands for research-based education. It would also be at odds with a research-focused, knowledge-intensive society (Alvesson, 2013, p. 101). To my
question to a student leader at Østfold whether the university ambition is a good argument for a merger, the answer was:

No, I think not. I don’t want to be a second-rate university. I’d rather be a good university college. That’s my personal opinion. I think we already have enough universities in Norway. I don’t see the need for more. I see the need for large institutions, also larger university colleges.

(Student leader, Østfold University College)

In this case it is the university idea that is questioned, not the merger idea. The direct link between university and quality is also questioned. In a discourse of praising academic drift there is a direct connection between being a university and deliver quality education. But this respondent does not focus on or say anything that supports that idea, rather, she believes it is better to be a good university college than a new university. This stands in sharp contrast to the modern perspective of a university always being perceived as better than a university college. She also uses a very personal form in saying “I don’t want to be a second-rate university”. In using the personal “I” she identifies with the university college. She also uses the collective personal form in “We have enough universities in Norway”. This discursive practice indicates organisational identification (Albert & Whetten, 1985). This identification is clearly linked to university college ideals. A merger with the aim of becoming a university threatens organisational identity, as the merged university college will be more research focused. Opposing the idea of university status can be construed as an expression of the traditional perspective I introduced in my conceptual framework chapter.

The difference between the modern and the traditional perspective is described by the University College Director at Østfold using a football metaphor:

They [Buskerud and Vestfold] wanted a university in their region and many of us at Østfold felt that we were being steamrollered. We were immediately accused of being defensive. Everyone wants to play in the Premier League and if one does not want that, there is something wrong with you. And in this world, to be among the best requires university status. That was the attitude that we met. We, on the other hand, held the view that the best path forward was to build a university college with a strong focus on bachelor’s and master’s programmes. We wanted to invest in this and not rashly commit ourselves to building PhD programmes that would inevitably reduce the possibility of developing further our portfolio of bachelor’s programmes as well as new master’s programmes of importance to the region. However, in my
The Director talks about how “they” (Buskerud and Vestfold) want to achieve university status. The use of “their” region instead of “our” region indicates he distances himself from the university idea. The way this is done is to use geographic distance as a way of communicating distance of interests. When Østfold felt “steamrolled” they were accused of being “defensive”. The attitude he met from Buskerud and Vestfold was that one should strive for university status. The football metaphor was used to divide those wanting to play in the Premier League, which here means being a university, from those not wanting to do that. He then continues explaining that Østfold wanted to focus on lower level study programmes and continue as a university college. This is discursive practice based on the traditional perspective, which becomes even clearer when he argues that building PhD programmes would restrict the development of these lower level study programmes. He also argues that this would have negative consequences for the region. In the traditional perspective where universities and university colleges are, and should be, separated there is an ideological choice of what one wants to be as a higher education institution. There is also a focus on operationalisation in the metaphor when bachelor’s and master’s programmes are put up against PhD programmes. If one chooses to develop PhD programmes, it would be at the expense of bachelor’s and master’s programmes. This construction of meaning is typical in the construction of opposition. On the other hand, in the construction of support, the development of PhD programmes is understood as something strengthening lower level programmes. This is an example of how operationalisation takes precedence over the idea if the idea is not supported.

Another indication of operationalisation is the use of “region”. In the construction of opposition with its focus on an inwards perspective, competition is between the three merger partners. “Region” is in this case therefore understood as the county of Østfold. This stands in contrast to the support discourse focusing on an outwards perspective, where “region” is understood as the three counties combined. What the Director does in the last sentence is to directly address how he understands the higher education sector. When he states that “in my world it is not obvious that clubs that play in the PL are serving society better than clubs that concentrate on recreational sports”,
he acknowledges the binary system as an ideal and sees things from a traditional perspective where universities and university colleges are different but equal.

The football metaphor in this quote is used to discursively construct opposition. The way this is done is to focus on operationalisation in choosing between levels of higher education, and to focus on regional (county) interests. Another way this is done is to focus on a traditional perspective where universities and university colleges serve different societal purposes. If we compare the traditional perspective with the modern perspective of what is considered “good” in Figure 4.2 on page 68, this becomes quite clear. An alternative way of using the football and league metaphor could be to compare higher education to the league, and saying that clubs (higher education institutions) on top are better than those at the bottom. From a modern perspective used in the construction of support this would mean that being a university is always better than being a university college as a university would play in a higher division. However, the football metaphor was not used that way by my respondent.

The football metaphor also shows how metaphors always need to be understood in a context. In my hypothetical example above the metaphor is limited to the league. The respondent however, used the metaphor in a wider context explaining the function of football/higher education in society. Opposing the idea of university status is communicated through the discursive use of a football metaphor meaning that not all clubs are supposed to play in the Premier League; some clubs serves society better focusing on recreational sports, just as some higher education institutions serves society better being a university college.

**Opposing merger**

The construction of a discourse in which a merger is opposed can be nuanced into two parts. The first is the opposition of any merger. This is an opposition to the ideological idea of larger higher education institutions. Here market ideas of economy and quality of scale are rejected. The advantages of being an independent university college far outweigh the advantages of a merger. As a smaller and more flexible organisation the university college can deliver better education. This ideological idea is under pressure, not only by the Ministry of
Education but from a contemporary ideology stating that bigger is always better.

The second is opposition to this particular merger. That means merger as structural reform is not rejected, but the merger process in this particular merger showed that a merger was not an accepted solution. In this case the primary focus was on operationalisation. This type of discourse construction was especially evident in the change from support to opposition. The reason for this change was that although there was some initial support for the merger, the merger process showed the result would not be acceptable. The grounds on which the opposition discourse was constructed centred round arguments of operationalisation.

**Outwards perspective**

I introduced the concept of outwards perspective in my conceptual framework chapter. Now it is time to go in depth on how that concept can be used to analyse discursive practices, and especially discursive practices of support. Words can be used differently depending on ideological and cultural context (Fairclough, 1992, p. 185). Words like “competition”, “necessity”, “survival”, “positioning” and “marginalisation” were placed in an ideological framework of market. This means the same word can be used in different discursive practices. These practices operate in a struggle for hegemony, which means that the worldview presented in a discursive practice is preferably the “natural” way of seeing things and it represents “common sense”.

The outward perspective used in the support discourse was based on an education market discourse. From this perspective the in-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1985, p. 8) of “we” was described as the new, merged university college and the out-group of “them” was described as other higher education institutions. In that sense the perspective can be viewed as an “outwards” perspective because in the construction of meaning you look “out” (Figure 6.3).
In a market, competition is a mechanism that operates between entities to secure market shares. Universities and university colleges are viewed as “quasi-corporate entities producing a wide range of goods and services in a competitive marketplace” (Gumport, 2000, p. 71).

In the outwards perspective “competition in higher education comes from domestic and foreign universities/colleges, private institutions and the increasing number of ‘virtual universities’” (Chandler, 2013, p. 244). What the higher education institutions compete for is students, staff and research funding. Competition for students is both a competition for the number of students and a competition for the best students. It is thus a matter of quantity in securing enough students to sustain the production of education. It is also a matter of quality as “better” students can be seen as a warranty for throughput. Better in this case refers to grades from upper secondary school. The better the grades, the better the student is. Note the instrumentality in this line of arguments. It is very much based on external, measurable variables used in quality assessment, and not based on students’ actual knowledge or interests. The logic is that better students will increase the number of graduating students. In production terms this would be a question of raising the level of output through securing input quality. This is usually referred to as throughput. Throughput is important because it is directly linked to remuneration. The higher the number of graduating students, the larger the sum of money paid to the higher education institution. Better students are also presumed to get better grades, which in turn increases the status of the higher education institution.

Competition for staff is primarily linked to academic staff. By securing the “best heads” one will have a competitive advantage. “Best” in this case refers to
the three main tasks academic employees need to do. Firstly, in the area of education, “best” means pedagogically skilled personnel who can secure a stable number of graduating students. The responsibility of throughput relies on the lecturer rather than the student. Secondly, in the area of research, “best” means productive in producing articles published in highly ranked journals. Research production is directly linked to remuneration making research-productive employees a good investment. The “best” academics are also expected to write applications for research funding that are accepted and thereby secure research funding. Thirdly, in the area of communication the “best” academics appear in the news as experts, they give public speaks and are generally visible in the public debate. This is seen as one of the three key areas an academic should engage in, but it also works as means of marketing the academic’s workplace. In this case the primary function is not related to money, but to status.

Competition for research funding is linked to the heavy focus on research communicated by the government. The “knowledge society” is presented as an ideal and research-based education is compulsory in Norwegian higher education. Exactly what “research-based” education is has been debated7, but in any case it takes a central position. Competition for research funding is important, as it is often the primary source of funding research projects. Without it, conditions for doing research are hard. Higher education institutions compete for both national and international funding. The Norwegian Research Council is a national funding source and the EU is an example of an international one. Competence in how to write good research applications is a competitive advantage as competition for research funding is fierce. University colleges also struggle with their inferior position in relation to universities, making it even harder to get funding.

In addition to competition for students, staff and research funding, it is also a competition for status. Having the best students, the best academics and several well-funded research projects increases the status of the higher education institution. Operating in a global market, status is of pivotal importance to win the competition for resources. Achieving university status is therefore seen as a way of being more competitive in the education market.

7 See Hyllseth (2001) for a discussion on researched based education.
In a global market change is discursively constructed as necessary. Necessity is linked to the notion of continuous change and adaption where “doing nothing is not an option” (Gumport, 2000, p. 72). It is an understanding of a merger as a necessity in order to be competitive. By using the word necessity a lack of choice is implied. If the only option is to merge there is no real possibility to make a decision about it (Brunsson, 2015, p. 86). As the higher education market changes, higher education institutions also need to change. The argument is that if one does not merge, the three university colleges will lose out in the competition for students, staff and research funding. In other words, it is necessary to merge to remain competitive in the education market. Just like competition, necessity is used in a market discourse where “we” is construed as the merged university college and “they” are the competing higher education institutions.

Change is also described as something inevitable. If we do not change, we will not stand a chance of survival. It is a question of change or die. The reason we need to change is in this case based on the argument that everybody else does it. This is what DiMaggio and Powell (1983) refer to as mimetic isomorphism. There are several other higher education institutions out there in merger processes or initiating merger processes. If we do not position ourselves we will lose the competition. This line of argument indicates an enterprise discourse where the identity of the workers is influenced by management values and intent. It is a way of controlling workers by shaping their identity. By being proactive and merge in order to become a university there is less risk of becoming an undergraduate factory, which in this case is seen as something bad. The perceived necessity to merge was reinforced by external pressure. This pressure came from the Ministry of Education, but also from “market” demands. From an outwards perspective it was necessary to merge in order to meet the expectations from the Ministry of Education and to meet the pressure from the market. The pressure from the Ministry of Education was perceived almost as a threat:

My experience is that the Ministry of Education has been very clear that life is going to be very hard if we remain small and stand alone.

(Chief Financial Officer, Østfold University College)
The message is that it will be difficult to continue as an independent university college. Doubts concerning the merger were not enough to say no to enter into a merger process. Even though a merger was not seen as necessary, it would be difficult to stand against the pressure from the Ministry of Education. Fewer and larger higher education institutions are an explicit goal for the Ministry of Education, a goal based on the Stjernø report which concluded with a recommendation to decrease the number of higher education institutions in Norway through a series of forced mergers. It was not only the Ministry of Education that put pressure on the university colleges, the policy of SAK (cooperation, division of labour and consolidation) contributed to this pressure:

Even if merger processes may be voluntary, what is not voluntary is the SAK policy.

(Rector, Østfold University College)

Cooperation means that higher education institutions should cooperate more in order to perform specific tasks; division of labour means that different higher education institutions do different things, and consolidation means larger and fewer entities. In this context the Rector uses the SAK policy as an argument for why the merger was necessary. Structural changes in the higher education sector make it necessary to merge. Here external factors like policy were used as an argument to merge.

External pressure also comes from a globalised market. From an outwards perspective market powers put pressure on the higher education institutions and make a merger necessary:

It became more obvious for many of us that there is a risk in standing alone as an institution in the landscape we now see developing with globalisation, internationalisation and international focus.

(Manager, Buskerud University College)

Being a university college in an education market is not limited to the domestic market. The respondent places the merger in a global perspective, which is typical for the outwards perspective. In order to prepare for international competition one needs to merge. It is necessary in order to face the challenges of a changing environment. One needs to adapt to the development of the
education market, which is becoming increasingly more globalised. This perspective is supported by researchers of mergers in higher education (Goedegebuure, 2011).

Change is described as inevitable, whether it is wanted or not. From this perspective, education market and academic drift do not only condition structural change, but determine it. Pressure from dominant ideologies makes discursive practice acknowledge the necessity for merger:

> The trend in society pushes for larger institutions, and for becoming a university. Or at least that one should develop more and more master's programmes, and more and more PhD programmes, and that research becomes an important aspect of the non-university sector. So there is really no point in working against that.

(Trade union representative, Buskerud University College)

The necessity stems from societal pressure; a pressure based on academic drift. Higher-level study programmes and research are the prime indicators of academic drift in the non-university sector. This drift is described as so powerful that it is discursively constructed as inevitable.

The necessity to merge in order to survive is partly based on the competitive situation. And that competitive situation was perceived more real in Buskerud than in Østfold. Buskerud has other higher education institutions geographically located within a shorter distance from where they are than what is the case in Østfold. Especially the higher education institutions in Oslo were seen as competing entities. Geographical location therefore influenced a perceived market situation. This indicates how an outwards perspective was used in the construction of meaning. The necessity to merge was caused by geographically close higher education institutions.

The necessity to merge may be a means of survival. “Like any species in an ecosystem, colleges and universities will seek to survive, and will choose change over the status quo in order to do so” (Eastman & Lang, 2001, p. 19, italics in original). In this case survival meant the existence of the three merger partners. In a market there is no guarantee for an organisation’s existence. Non-viable organisations will simply go bust and disappear. This is how the market works. Consumers’ free choice determines which organisations are going to survive or not. In an education market students are consumers who
choose to take their education at a certain higher education institution. Students are commodities needed to continue the production of education. If the students do not come there will be no means of production and the organisation will need to declare bankruptcy.

The necessity to merge in order to survive was also linked to the concept of an education market. The consequences if one chose not to merge were described as severe. In worst-case scenarios the whole university college would stand the risk of being closed down:

But I think for Østfold’s sake, I think they too need to become bigger. I don’t think the small university colleges will survive. Even if Østfold is not that small a university college I think all three of us [Buskerud, Vestfold, Østfold] need to consider being bigger if we are to survive.

(Manager, Buskerud University College)

Small university colleges were feared to lose out in the competition. Therefore the merger was necessary. Østfold is a medium sized university college in Norway with approximately 4000 students when the merger process started, but according to the respondent that size was not sufficient to feel safe in the restructuring of higher education. This understanding of how large a university college must be in order to feel safe stands in sharp contrast to other discursive practices where the suggestion that Østfold would risk being shut down was rejected. In that case the worst that could happen was a forced merger with a partner they did not approve of, but cease to exist as provider of higher education in Østfold was seen as totally unrealistic.

The survival argument is closely related to fear, discursively constructed as a motivational factor for action. The fear of standing alone and risk the possibility of being closed down drove the urge to merge. And if the university college survived, it would not be as a desired type of a university college:

So it is simply the fear of not existing, or at least existing without any kind of ambitions or future prospects at all. That’s what drives me to have a desire to be part of something bigger.

(Student leader, Vestfold University College)
Without a merger there would be no future prospects; that is, if the university college survived at all. The driving forces for wanting to be “part of something bigger” was the fear of losing the competition in the market.

But the argument that the university colleges would risk being closed down if they did not merge did not go unchallenged:

I don’t think they will shut down Østfold University College and locate the provision of all higher education for Østfold in Oslo. I have difficulties believing that.

(Member of the board, Østfold University College)

The sense of a necessity to merge in order to survive was questioned and rejected as unrealistic. The line of argument was that as long as the population in Østfold have a relatively low level of education it would be poor regional policy to close Østfold University College. There would not be political consensus for that. Here the discourse of an outwards perspective based on the discourse of market is challenged by a discourse of regional politics. What is questioned is the reality of market mechanisms operating in higher education:

People don’t buy that: if we don’t become a university, if we don’t merge and become very large and strong, all students will disappear abroad. No one believes that. There is something in the credibility of the argument that sometimes crackles.

(Member of the board, Vestfold University College)

The respondent polarises the viewpoints by saying that “all students will disappear abroad” if there is no merger, in this way implying that that is what supporters of the merger believe. There is no data in my material where anyone even hints to such a consequence. In a worldview where there is no risk of being closed down as a university college, relying on fear was perceived to be provocative and a way of constructing arguments:

I think it caused an unnecessary amount of aggression to play on that fear. And that has been done the whole time. People have found that rather annoying because it is not a valid argument for merger.

(Student leader, Østfold University College)
Here there are different worldviews of survival. In one worldview, a merger was necessary to survive in the education market. There was fear of being left alone. In the other, this fear was not called for. Using a tactic of scaring instead of motivating was met with annoyance. The scenario of “do or die” was very real in discourses based on market mechanisms, but it was not real for those rejecting such a worldview:

Either we need to do something or else we go bust. University colleges are not in that situation. [...] Because everyone sees that we are going to survive as an institution, even if we don’t merge. I think the anxiety for the unknown was more communicated than the advantages of a merger.

(Manager, Buskerud University College)

The respondent distinguishes university colleges from “other” organisations rejecting a market idea where university colleges can “go bust”. University colleges are not in that situation. The threat of disappearing as an organisation is considered an empty threat. Focus should have been on the positive advantages of a merger (the carrot) more than the negative effects of not doing it (the stick). The question of survival was not limited to the organisational level. It was also a matter of survival on the faculty level:

The Faculty of Education is our largest faculty. It’s one of our flagships here. They say we will not exist in the future if we don’t become part of something bigger; we can’t satisfy the demands placed on us. And who am I then to say: no, a merger is a bad option.

(Student leader, Vestfold University College)

The respondent refers to someone saying that a merger is necessary to survive. This is used as an argument for why one should merge. The reason for the necessity of a merger is that there are demands towards the faculty, which they cannot cope with alone. What specific demands, are not revealed. Communicating necessity in the pre-merger phase is a way management can make employees identify with the merged organisation (Giessner, 2011). In this case the merger process was terminated before the merger, but communicating necessity was still important in the construction of support. Discourses of survival were used on different organisational levels. The necessity and survival arguments are in line with the university ambition. A university is a positive development; university status is seen as something
good. This is the pull factor, the carrot. At the same time a merger is necessary in order to survive. This is the push factor, the stick.

Another word used in the outwards perspective of a market discourse was that of positioning. The merger was necessary to survive in the market and the way to do that was to achieve a market position that secured the future for the university college. Positioning is in this case understood to be relative to the position of other higher education institutions. By merging now a better position would be achieved. Positioning is therefore necessary to stay competitive and to survive in the education market. The consequence of not going through with the merger would lead the three university colleges to be marginalised. In a market discourse this means losing market shares. The worst-case scenario was to go bankrupt, but even if that did not happen the university colleges would be marginalised. Marginalisation was described as a consequence of not getting enough and the best students, not getting the best academic staff, and not getting sufficient research funding. Positioning would be difficult, as the university colleges would not be competitive. To avoid marginalisation in the education market a merger was necessary.

The fear of being closed down was moderated in a fear of not surviving as a desired university college. Facing the risk of ending up as a university college that only produced bachelor's degrees was seen as a non-desirable future:

This [merger] project was about being ahead of the reforms in order to have control ourselves – to become stronger. And we would have managed that. In a couple of years we would have been accredited as a university and avoided being afraid of ending up as a bachelor factory.

(Rector, Østfold University College)

Being a “bachelor factory” means focusing on lower level educations, first degrees. This very clearly shows the influence of the modern perspective of academic drift. The original intention of the non-university sector was in fact to be a “bachelor factory”, although that term was never used. Instead it was called “short-cycled vocationally oriented education” intended for the masses. Time was also of importance. It was described as important to merge now in order to stay ahead of the reforms. The reason for that was that one is more in control if one merges now rather than wait and then maybe experience a forced merger with someone one does not want to merge with. Time is also important
from a competition perspective. By merging now one is better positioned in the education market. Survival is not just a matter of surviving as an institution; it is also a matter of surviving as a desired institution:

But also the university ambition has been vehemently critici
dicated, but if we don’t experience a completely unexpected development in Norwegian higher education, this institution [Østfold] will be the smallest institution in the eastern part of Norway and remain a university college, while most of the others enter constellations where they become universities.

(Rector, Østfold University College)

A merger was seen as a necessary move in order not to be marginalised in the market. Competition between merged university colleges and other higher education institutions would threaten smaller university colleges and cause them to become marginalised.

What we need to remember in the discussion of an outwards perspective is that it is a construction of meaning. It is not restricted to specific groups or individuals. However, as the Rector of Vestfold University College explains there were differences between the merger partners:

If we are to meet students’ expectations and if we are to meet the requirements the region asks from us, then we must be part of something bigger. That pressure has not been on the other side of the fjord [Østfold].

(Rector, Vestfold University College)

This understanding of Østfold being in another competitive situation was supported by the chair of the board at Buskerud University College:

But I think the explanation became very clear. Østfold is in a different competitive situation. They recruit relatively well from their own region. [...] I don’t think they felt the same pressure from competition as we do on this side of the fjord.

(Chair of the board, Buskerud University College)

At the same time, as we saw in the quotes above, the Rector at Østfold University College and the Rector at Vestfold University College agreed that the merger was necessary. How does this add up? The answer lies in how to
understand discursive practices. What the Rector at Vestfold University College refers to is the dominant discourse at Østfold University College rejecting the idea of the merger being necessary. Contesting discursive practices challenge dominant discourses and are constantly struggling for hegemonic position (Fairclough, 1992, p. 93). The outwards perspective primarily used in the construction of support was the dominant discourse at Buskerud and Vestfold. But as we have just seen it was also represented at Østfold University College, although it held a weaker position there.

To sum up the outwards perspective: A merger with the goal to become a university was necessary to be competitive and reach a position that reduced the risk of marginalisation and secured the survival of the organisation. In this worldview higher education is construed as operating in a market. In this market “we” were described as the merged university college and “they” were described as other national and international higher education institutions. I have called this an outwards perspective because focus in these discursive practices was on the relation between the merged college and the outside world.

**Summary**

In this first act we have seen the start of the merger process. Although there were differences between the merger partners there was not so much opposition that the merger process stood the risk of being terminated. Based on the report “A comprehensive view II” the boards at Buskerud and Vestfold agreed to continue the process with the specific goal to merge into one institution no later than 1 January 2013. However, hesitation expressed by Østfold made it difficult for them to commit to a formal project. In the next act we shall see how Østfold handled this hesitation, and what the outcome was.
Chapter 7 – Act two: Hesitation (April 2010 – November 2010)

Things were not going as smoothly as planned. The first act ended with Østfold hesitating to make a decision to continue the merger process. They said they needed to investigate other alternatives before they could commit to the process. Buskerud and Vestfold understood this need and were willing to wait for Østfold to do their investigation. In this act I discuss the report produced by Østfold, and the consultative statements that followed the report. This means that my analytical perspective in this act is from the side of Østfold. The other two university colleges did not hesitate as they had already made their decision to continue the merger process. The act ends with Østfold making a decision to continue the merger process. Although this act is much shorter than the others it is important because it shows how doubts at Østfold conditioned the construction of support and opposition. The need to go another round before deciding to continue the merger process and the concerns shown in the consultative statements make it easier to understand the discursive practices of support and opposition and how they evolved over time.

Report – Østfold University College’s institutional cooperation – investigation of alternatives to merging with Buskerud University College and Vestfold University College

On the basis of the report “A comprehensive view II” the boards at Buskerud and Vestfold agreed to continue the process with a specific goal to merge to one institution no later than 1 January 2013. The board at Østfold hesitated. Consultative statements following the report had shown that the external consultative statements were predominantly positive to a merger, while the internal ones were substantially more negative. It was especially pointed out that the basis for making a decision was not good enough. The University College Director at Østfold therefore recommended the board to gather more information on the alternatives for a merger before making its final decision. The board made the decision “to provide a broader basis for Østfold University College to start a process to merge with Vestfold University College and Buskerud University College, the decision is postponed to November 2010”.

By the end of September 2010 the report “Østfold University College’s institutional cooperation – investigation of alternatives to merging with Buskerud University College and Vestfold University College” was completed.
A request for consultative statements was sent to faculties and administrative units at Østfold, and by 28 October 2010 the consultative statements regarding investigating Østfold’s institutional cooperation were completed. Based on the report and the consultative statements the board at Østfold on 22 November 2010 agreed to continue the process with the specific goal to merge to one institution no later than 1 January 2013.

The board appointed a project group to assess possible consequences if Østfold chose to continue as an independent university college while other higher education institutions in the region merged. They were also asked to investigate alternative cooperation or merger partners besides Buskerud and Vestfold. The time frame for the project group was quite short with an expected completion of the report by September 2010. The project group was not asked to make any conclusion, but to provide a better foundation for the board to make a decision. The report went on hearing before it was sent to the board in October 2010.

The project group consisted of nine members who had not previously participated in the making of the report “A comprehensive view II”. They started their work 1 July 2010 and their task was to provide relevant and reliable information on possible cooperation partners in the region and the consequences of choosing different alternatives of cooperation. In addition they were asked to evaluate the consequences of continuing as an independent university college. The project group were to map different cooperation partners and cooperation solutions that could be an alternative to merging with Buskerud and Vestfold. They were not asked to recommend or discourage any possible alternative, but assess their strengths and weaknesses, as well as the possibilities and threats they posed for Østfold.

The project group identified the following relevant cooperation partners; Buskerud University College (Buskerud), Vestfold University College (Vestfold), The Norwegian University of Life Science, Telemark University College, Akershus University College and Oslo University College. There was also the alternative to continue as an independent university college. However, saying no to continuing the merger process was considered to be difficult due to the political pressure from the Ministry of Education to initiate merger processes.
The Norwegian University of Life Science reaffirmed their intentions to continue the collaboration within the Oslofjord Alliance, but they had already stated that they did not wish to participate in a merger process with Østfold/Buskerud/Vestfold due to their pending merger with The Norwegian School of Veterinary Science. They also rejected the idea of a possible merger with Østfold only, and they were reluctant to initiate an extended, formalised cooperation with Østfold as well. The project group concluded that the Norwegian University of Life Science, at the moment, was not a relevant alternative to the Buskerud/Vestfold merger. Telemark University College had no interest in a long-term commitment with Østfold as they oriented themselves southwards to the University of Agder and wanted to merge with them. Geographically this university college was also in a completely different direction; the project group therefore did not consider them to be a relevant alternative to the Buskerud/Vestfold merger. Akershus University College and Oslo University College dismissed Østfold’s interest in long-term committed cooperation on the grounds that they were already in a merger process with each other. They also pointed to the fact that their geographical focus was on the Oslo region.

The project group had a meeting with the management at Buskerud and Vestfold to clarify the current situation on the merger issue. The main conclusion from that meeting was that Østfold was a wanted and needed partner. They also concluded that it was a goal for all parties to experience that their own priorities were so well cared for that they wished to merge. If that was not the case, all parties were free to withdraw from the process at any time. This is a construction of meaning that is in line with the worldview that the decision Buskerud and Vestfold made when they decided to continue the merger process was just that – a decision to continue the merger process, not a decision to merge. As I described in the previous chapter there was another worldview that saw the decision made by Buskerud and Vestfold as a decision to merge. The merger process was in this case a matter of finding the best way of organising the merged university college.

It was seen as unlikely that Buskerud and Vestfold would commit to a long-term partnership with Østfold if Østfold chose to withdraw from the merger process at this point. Continuing the merger process with Buskerud and Vestfold was seen as the only realistic alternative to continue as an independent university college. In other words, it was Buskerud and Vestfold,
or nothing. The result of the report showed that although all higher education institutions were in principle interested in cooperation, Buskerud and Vestfold were the only ones that wished to merge with Østfold. It was pointed out that if Østfold chose to continue as an independent university college and merge with Buskerud and Vestfold at a later stage, their negotiation position would be weakened.

The report ended with acknowledging that Buskerud and Vestfold were the only higher education institutions that wanted to merge with Østfold at that time, and that Buskerud and Vestfold needed Østfold to reach their goal to become a university. This argument relates to my concept of the idea of why the three university colleges should merge. It also stated that Østfold were in a position to negotiate with two similarly sized university colleges and that gave Østfold a better negotiation position than they would have if they waited until Buskerud and Vestfold had merged and then started a negotiation process. By then Buskerud and Vestfold would be nearly twice the size of Østfold, which Østfold thought would lessen their negotiation strength. This argument relates to my concept of the operationalisation of the merger process. Based on these two arguments the report concluded that:

A decision to exit the merger negotiations now, for a possible return to them at a later date cannot be recommended. Østfold University College should in the autumn 2010 choose if the aim is to continue as an independent institution or merge with others (p. 32).

The recommendation was clear on the fact that it was now or never. If Østfold left the negotiations now the train would leave the station. The choice, then, was between merging with Buskerud and Vestfold or continuing as an independent university college in the foreseeable future. The use of the phrasing “merger negotiation” indicates that a decision to merge had not yet been made. This is in line with official statements that a formal decision to merge was to be made after the pre-merger phase was concluded. However, as we saw in the previous chapter there was a discursive practice that a de facto decision to merge had already been made when Buskerud and Vestfold decided to continue the process. From Østfold’s point of view this was not the case. In the appendix were minutes from a meeting between the project group and rectors and directors from Buskerud and Vestfold. The meeting took place 23 August 2010. The rector at Buskerud there said that, “if an institution
throughout this process finds that the solutions chosen do not benefit the institution; the institution may choose to withdraw” (p. 50). There was a discrepancy between this statement and the worldview that a decision to merge was made as Buskerud and Vestfold decided to continue the merger process.

The two discourses of whether the merger process was about deciding on merger or not, or finding the best way of organising the new university college, were intertwined and can only be analytically separated. However, they are incommensurable. A discourse on finding the best way to organise the new university college presupposes a decision to merge has been made. This was not a formal explicit decision made by the boards, but was implied in the discursive practice. As such it conditioned other forms of non-discursive social practices. In other words, the way we talk stands in a dialectical relationship with the way we act (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 1992). At the same time it conditions other discursive practices. How a merger process is discursively constructed depends on what the merger process is understood to be about. The issue of different worldviews in this matter is an example of the entanglement of discourses and how they dialectically conditioned each other.

**Consultative statements**

After the report was completed it was sent on hearing for consultative statements. All faculties and administrative divisions were asked to give feedback on the various alternatives outlined in the report. They were also asked how Østfold could best position itself in the higher education landscape and whether they saw it as advantageous to continue the process with an aim to merge with Buskerud and Vestfold.

The various units were divided in their opinions and recommendations. In the financial and operating unit the majority were against a further merger investigation. The study and research unit, and the personnel and organisation unit recommended further merger investigations. All units wished there had been information concerning economic aspects of the project. They were also clear that day-to-day activities should not suffer from a merger investigation. Østfold University College consists of two campuses – one in the city of Fredrikstad and one in the city of Halden. In the campus administration in Fredrikstad there was a narrow majority in favour of further investigation. They all agreed that this was a question of investigating a possible merger and that the final decision of whether to merge or not should be based on that
investigation. The main arguments from those in favour of continuing the process were related to competition and as such drew on a discourse of education market and an outwards perspective. A merged higher education institution was considered to be more attractive for students and staff, and if they did not merge there would be a risk of becoming marginalised in the higher education market. They also pointed out that university ambition in itself was not a driver for merger. A possible university status should come as a consequence of academic development rather than being a goal in itself. The main arguments for those who did not want to continue the process can be summed up as fear of more bureaucracy and increased costs due to structural changes. In addition, the focus should be on undergraduate programmes instead of developing PhDs. They also argued that internal competition between the parts of the new university college would increase.

The campus administration in Halden was divided with a majority recommending further investigation and a minority recommending continuing as an independent university college. They pointed out that the outcome of negotiations should determine a merger or not. They also argued that the university ambition could have negative consequences for undergraduate programmes and that this strategy was a dead end. The student parliament was divided in its view and did not recommend any of the alternatives. However, they expressed concern that there was no financial analysis presented with the report. The Norwegian Theatre Academy recommended not merging with Buskerud and Vestfold. They argued it would be strategically better to use resources to strengthen Østfold’s own portfolio of courses and programmes rather than using them on a merger process. The Faculty of Health and Social Studies recommended continuing the merger process with Buskerud and Vestfold. The Faculty of Engineering recommended that Østfold continue as an independent university college and terminate the merger process. They pointed out that they missed a financial assessment of the alternatives. The Faculty of Computer Sciences recommended Østfold to continue as an independent institution. They did not share the university ambition and feared increased costs as a result of a merger. The Faculty of Education recommended Østfold to continue the merger process. However, they underlined the importance of emphasising that the decision to proceed with a merger process was a decision that needed to be followed up by further studies before a final decision on the merger could be made. They also recommended the University College Board not to go on to pursue university
status before the consequences of such a development was thoroughly investigated. The Faculty of Business, Languages and Social Sciences was divided in a majority recommending Østfold to continue the investigation on a possible merger, and a minority that recommended Østfold to continue as an independent higher education institution. The majority recommending a merger pointed out that the merged university college should work to be accredited as a regional university within a reasonable and realistic time frame. They also commented that there was no financial assessment of merger costs and that such a financial assessment was necessary to make a final decision on a merger.

The consultative statements showed substantial opposition to the merger. There was no consistent support of the idea of becoming a university. More bureaucracy, higher cost, less influence on decisions and negative effects for undergraduate programmes were among the arguments against continuing the merger process. The consultative statements also asked for a financial assessment. It was pointed out that there should be a financial assessment both of the costs related to the merger and costs of operating the merged university college. In order to make a decision whether to merge or not, these costs must be presented. What was in focus in the construction of opposition was the operationalisation of a merger expressed in terms of bureaucracy, resource allocation and power.

The arguments from those opposing the merger focus also emphasised regional interests. By continuing as an independent university college, decision power would remain in Østfold. A merger was seen as giving up on regional interest because there would be less influence on decisions. Therefore a merger was seen as a threat to institutional autonomy. This stood in contrast to those who argued that a merger was not in conflict with regional interests. On the contrary, Buskerud expressed severe regional interest but saw a merger as a means of strengthening these interests. In short, all university colleges had regional interests but did not agree whether a merger would strengthen or weaken those interests. This disagreement indicates how the concept of competition was both discursively constructed as something between the merger partners and as something between the merger partners and other higher education institutions, depending on whether the perspective was inwards or outwards. I will return to a more thorough discussion on the inwards perspective in Act three.
Based on the report and the consultative statements, the board at Østfold decided to continue the merger process. In one consultative statement it was pointed out that the report was biased in favour of continuing the process in stating that “In our view, the report on some points gives a negative image of continuing as an independent university college, without giving any evidence of it”. There were also comments that based on what the report revealed:

The report did not necessarily have to conclude that we should go ahead. There was sufficient material there to say something else.

(Trade union representative, Østfold University College)

The decision to continue the merger process was in other words questioned. These constructions of meaning of course did not disappear when the decision to continue the process was made, but coexisted with other discursive practices in shaping the merger process.

**Third merger partner**

As I have already explained, Buskerud and Vestfold had an explicit ambition to become a university, described in their long-term strategy plans. In order to achieve university status one of the criteria is to have at least four PhD programmes in different academic fields. These programmes are expensive to develop and operate, and the two university colleges needed a third partner to achieve their goal:

My understanding is that Vestfold and Buskerud wanted to merge primarily because they wanted to achieve university status. A couple of years ago the rector at Vestfold clearly stated that Vestfold and Buskerud, on their own, were too small to carry the burden of becoming a university. They needed a third party.

(Member of the board, Østfold University College)

This statement by a member of the board at Østfold indicates that it was not the mutual goal to become a university that was the reason why Østfold joined. The decision was partly historical, related to the Oslofjord Alliance, and partly because Buskerud and Vestfold needed a third partner. There is a difference between a *wanted* partner and a *needed* partner. The three university colleges described a merger between them as a default solution. There were no other
options. Buskerud and Vestfold had explored other possibilities in their region just to find that all other potential merger partners were either already in a merger process or not interested. Østfold had done the same, as the report “Østfold University College’s institutional cooperation – investigation of alternatives to merging with Buskerud University College and Vestfold University College” clearly showed. In addition, already being partners in the Oslofjord Alliance made it difficult to exclude other partners of that alliance in a merger process.

The discourse of need opened up for (at least) two different constructions of meaning. The first was that Østfold would be in a good negotiation position because:

If they [Buskerud and Vestfold] were to reach that [university] ambition they had to join forces with someone else, because they couldn’t do it alone.

(Human Resource Manager, Østfold University College)

As long as Østfold could deny Buskerud and Vestfold the possibility of achieving university status they held some power over them (Emerson, 1962).

The other construction of meaning was that as a needed and not necessarily a wanted partner Østfold was in a defensive position. Not sharing the ambition of becoming a university was discursively constructed as an inferior position. The arguments put forward in the opposition discourse at Østfold that Buskerud and Vestfold were only interested in merging with Østfold to get their hands on Østfold’s money can be connected to a discourse of being a needed partner rather than a wanted partner.

Summary
From an outwards perspective the merger was construed as a necessity to face competition in a global education market. This was a discourse where the aim was to avoid being marginalised by other higher education institutions. The idea of university status was supported, but what is important to notice is the understanding of becoming a university as a consequence of a merger. This understanding stands in contrast to the understanding that university ambition was the premise for the merger. The difference of consequence and premise relates to the link between idea and operationalisation. In the case of
university status as a consequence focus lies on operationalisation. It is a bottom-up process where PhD programmes are developed first, and then, *when* the criteria are met one can apply for university status. Other operationalisation factors like resource allocation, consequences for undergraduate programmes and so on, are taken into consideration when one starts deciding on PhD programmes. When the idea to achieve university status is a premise for the merger, however, operationalisation is a consequence. This means that measures need to be taken to reach that goal. In both cases both the idea of becoming a university and the operationalisation of developing PhD programmes are supported. However, what differs is the discursive construction of sequence. This sequence is crucial for how priorities are understood.

The difference in university ambition was perhaps the biggest difference between the three university colleges. That was why Østfold wanted to go another round. A member of the board at Østfold explains:

> It became clear that there was disagreement on university ambition, and we had a lot of discussions about that. That was one of the reasons the board chose to say that we need a better foundation, so the whole merger process started three months later than originally intended because we asked for a postponement to get some kind of foundation in the organisation. And we can say that what happened was that we came up with that compromise, so there was a compromise formulated about the university ambition saying that we eventually should become a university of applied science. But what *eventually* meant was not clear.

(Member of the board, Østfold University College)

At this point Østfold had decided to continue the merger process. At the same time there were different opinions on the idea of becoming a university. The big issue was how this ambition was to be textually constructed in following reports. As we will soon discover in Act three it was downplayed, as the board member from Østfold explained above. However, this strategy led to discourses of support and opposition where the education market and academic drift took centre stage. With a decision from Østfold to continue the merger process the next step was to set up a project organisation and start a more thorough investigation. In the third act I discuss one of the five workgroup reports produced in this phase. After that I discuss how university status is seen as a consequence *of* rather than a premise *for* merger. I also discuss the due diligence and what consequences it had for the merger process.
I end the act with a discussion of the inwards perspective as an alternative to the outwards perspective.
Chapter 8 – Act three: Investigation (December 2010 – December 2011)

The second act ended with all three university colleges finally being on board the merger process. In this act the process really kicks off. A project organisation is established. Workgroups are formed and reports are produced. This is also when the tide turns in Østfold. A number of key events created doubt in Østfold whether a merger was the right way to go. To make things worse a due diligence added to the antagonism between discourses of support and opposition and between the merger partners. The act ends with insecurity and mistrust. These are indeed exiting times.

Report – Vision, academic profile and strategic objectives (June 2011)

There were five workgroup reports produced in this phase of the investigation. The one setting the tone for the further process was the one describing the new university college vision, academic profile and strategic objectives. It carried with it the idea of the merger, and was in that sense a continuation of the merger idea presented in the report “A comprehensive view II” that I analysed in the Act one. The workgroup consisted of members from all three university colleges. The workgroup’s mandate was to present a proposal for the new institution’s vision, academic profile and strategic objectives. They were asked to define short- and long-term goals that described strategic areas for the next years to come. These goals were seen as normative for the development of a strategic plan. They were also asked to draw up a draft for a strategy process to function as a base for the further work on establishing a new strategy plan. A premise was that all six campuses should continue as parts of a multi-campus university college. This meant that a restructuring involving the closing of one or more university colleges or campuses was out of the question.

The workgroup’s members represented different parts of the organisations, including academic and administrative managers as well as representatives from academic and administrative staff. There were also representatives from trade unions and the student organisations included in the workgroup.

The workgroup described its interpretation of the mandate as:

The workgroup has worked with a relatively short deadline and has seen it as its main task both to discuss and concretise the new institution’s vision, main academic
The three aspects, vision, academic profile, and strategic objectives, were presented with one chapter each. The name “Oslofjord University College” was chosen by the group as a preliminary name for the new university college since a formal name had not yet been decided.

**Vision**

The vision was described in the following way:

Oslofjord University College is an educational institution for vocational-oriented study programmes. The university college is an important partner for the regional community and businesses; it is nationally recognised and internationally oriented. Teaching and research are characterised by curiosity and knowledge development. The university college has ambitions to develop the institution to a vocational-oriented university (p. 13).

The idea of becoming a university was part of the vision although it was put last in the vision statement. This is an example of how university status as a goal was downplayed through textual positioning (Fairclough, 1992, p 77). A merger was described as the best way to achieve the academic ambitions the three university colleges had. These ambitions were described on page 13 as:

To maintain and further develop a broad educational provision in the three county regions that is competitive with regard to academic quality and a stable pool of applicants.

For larger and more robust academic milieus that may constitute the academic basis for the development of several master’s degrees and doctorates in the areas that make up the new institution’s academic profile.

For larger and more impactful research milieus that are recognised nationally and internationally.
The university ambition was not explicitly stated in the list of ambitions. However, ambitions were clearly inspired by both an education market discourse and the notion of academic drift. In the first paragraph the goal was to be competitive. This was going to be achieved by offering a broad range of study programmes. One competitive advantage was described as “academic quality”. Academic quality refers to research, which implies academic drift. The next paragraph stated that the university college needed to be able to develop both master’s and PhD programmes. The means to do this was to create larger units. In addition these units were specified as units in the areas that were in line with the academic profile. The last paragraph reaffirms that size was of importance, indicating discursive practice of economy of scale and scope. It was also argued that research should be both nationally and internationally oriented which supports the idea of higher education globalisation. In other words, it is a discursive practice of an outwards perspective.

After the ambitions had been described, the issue of university status was stated as:

The new Oslofjord University College has ambitions that in the long term may give the region a vocational-oriented university (p. 13).

The use of the metonymy “Oslofjord University College” suggests a unity among the three merger partners for university ambition. Just like metaphors, a metonymy also serves the function to provide understanding – however, its primary function is to “allow us to use one entity to stand for another (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 36, italics in original). What the entity “Oslofjord University College” stands for here is the merged university college. As such it is communicated as an entity with a unified ambition to become a university. It thus has a referential function which allows us to “focus more specifically on certain aspects of what is being referred to” (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 37); in this case the ambition to become a university. Through the discursive practice of the metonymy, consensus on ambition is communicated. The ambition of becoming a university is time-framed with the use of “long-term”. How long “long-term” is, is not further specified. Using the term “give” as a consequence of a merger downplays the operationalisation needed to achieve university status. What lies behind “give” is the need to develop PhD programmes and reallocate resources. An alternative way of saying this could be “we chose to
prioritise this instead of that so that we can become a university”. In that case university status would be a consequence of the operationalisation. A gift is something you get without paying for it. By using the word “give” it is implied you will get it for free. This is a way of discursively marginalise operationalisation used in an inwards perspective. It becomes irrelevant to negotiate about something you get for free. In other words, the idea of becoming a university takes precedence over the operationalisation of how that is going to be achieved.

The ambition to become a university was based on three arguments in the report. Firstly, the development to become a university was described as related to general knowledge-development and the need for education and research regionally, nationally and internationally. Secondly, it was linked to the need for educating a sufficient number of well-qualified professionals with relevant and future-oriented skills. And thirdly, better possibilities for positioning in a world characterised by increased internationalisation of research and higher education, at the same time as there are increased regional and national expectations for higher education.

All three of these arguments are based on discourses of education market and academic drift. In the first argument general “knowledge-development” refers to the ideology of the knowledge society. It also relates to the education market discourse as the need for education and research are not restricted to local conditions, but operate in a national and even global context. This is an acknowledgement of a research market where research is construed as a commodity to be bought and sold. The second argument that a “sufficient number” of students are needed implies a rationality of supply and demand. One might ask what a “sufficient number” really means. Sufficient for whom? For industry demand? For higher education institutions to be satisfied? The same questions could be made for “relevant”. In the third argument the outwards perspective of education market can be seen by the use of “positioning” and “internalisation”. The message conveyed in the three arguments is that we live in a global world of research and education and we need to become a university to be fully included into that world.

**Academic profile**

The next topic in the report was the academic profile, which was described as “vocationally oriented and society and employment oriented education” as well
as “practical-based and applied science research”. This profile was congruent with the non-university sector’s focus on vocationally oriented education and applied science. This is what distinguishes university colleges from the more academically focused universities. However, through academic drift university colleges become more like universities as they increase their focus on research (Morphew & Huisman, 2002). At the same time there is a need to separate the two. It was a goal to become a university, but a different type of university than the old “traditional” universities. This is discursively constructed as separating research into more practice oriented applied research unlike basic research undertaken by “traditional” universities. This differentiation of what universities do conditions discourses of “new” and “old” universities. These concepts are value laden, ranking old universities over the new. In the construction of support this was not a problem as even though new universities are not “as good” as the old ones they are still “better” than university colleges. This relates to the concept of a “modern” perspective where “new” universities are always seen as better than “good” university colleges. Academic drift is in this case not just seen as something inevitable but also something desired. It represents an intended and wanted change of the higher education sector.

The academic profile described in the report included study programmes linked to four main areas. These areas were 1) Business, Social- and Information Science, 2) Education Science, Humanities and Arts, 3) Technology, Computer Science, and Maritime Science, and 4) Health- and Social Science. Emphasis was made that the university college needed to clarify their profile in relation to other higher education institutions. The reason was to make the university college more attractive for potential students and staff. The academic profile described the university college as having a regional foundation, being a nationally leading institution and having an international perspective. “Region” was in this case described as the three counties where the three university colleges were located. It was also emphasised that the university college was in a competitive situation. In order to face national and international competition the new university college needed to “facilitate criteria to become a university, within a limited timeframe” (p. 19). The criteria referred to here were the development of PhD programmes. In the statement above from the report, university ambition was “a long-term” goal. Here it was described as within a “limited timeframe”. The rather unspecific use of time was a way of textually downplaying the university ambition. Exactly what
criteria needed to become a university was not stated, although from the context it is understood to be PhD programmes.

On page 20, the development of PhD programmes was mentioned for the first time in the report: “Some areas are already designated and PhDs achieved, while others are under development”. The PhD referred to as achieved, and as such being operative was the PhD programme in Micro- and nanotechnology at Vestfold. Programmes under development were disclosed in the next part of the report although they were not very specific. The main area at the Faculty of Health at Buskerud was described as connected to “health aid to elderly people with complex needs” (p. 20), and an application for a PhD programme in that area had been sent to The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) for approval. Buskerud also worked on a PhD in Business and Administration at the Faculty of Business and Social Science. As already mentioned, Vestfold had an operative PhD programme in Micro- and nanotechnology. In addition Vestfold sent an application for a new PhD in the spring of 2011. This PhD was developed by the Faculty of Education. Østfold did not have any PhD programmes established or under development.

The proposed four main areas corresponded to the areas of the four PhD programmes either established or under development – Micro- and nanotechnology, and Teacher Education at Vestfold, and Business and Administration, and Health Science at Buskerud. Internationalisation and quality were described as important features of the academic profile. Internationalisation was important in the sense that higher education was described as part of a “global market” (p. 24). A global perspective was understood as having consequences for lectures, curriculum, student and staff exchange, and research activities. It was recommended in the report that the new institution should have:

A clear international orientation with an ambition to be an internationally attractive cooperation partner within specific education and research areas (p. 23).

With a focus on internationalisation, globalisation, and market the new university college is discursively constructed as a business with the whole world as its playing field. In the support discourse this worldview was adopted, and the text in the report resembled to a large extent texts used in constructing the support discourse. As we will see later, the discourse of support
represented in the report was challenged in the consultative statements by an opposition discourse.

**Strategic objectives**

There was disagreement in the workgroup whether they should recommend university ambition as a main objective. In the main objective stated in the report it was *not* mentioned:

The Oslofjord University College is going to be an attractive and competitive institution for students, a recognised regional provider of knowledge, and a stimulating workplace that recruits competent employees (p. 27).

The strategic objectives were divided into the three areas of 1) education, 2) research, development and innovation, and 3) communication and public relations in the report. One of the educational objectives was to offer students at least one doctoral programme within each main profile. This meant that although university ambition was not explicitly stated in the main objective, there were strategic objectives that, if implemented, would make the university college satisfy the criteria to become a university. There was also a paragraph in the report discussing the problems the group had had regarding university ambition:

There has been disagreement in the workgroup whether the group should communicate academic ambition, such as the issue of university ambition. However, the group has been solution oriented in its approach. We have identified challenges, and the dilemmas have been solved through a positive climate of cooperation (p. 30).

The disagreement on how the issue of university status should be handled can be traced back to the fact that both Buskerud and Vestfold have had university ambition as part of their strategic plans since 2005-2006, while Østfold has had no such ambition in their strategic plan. When it came to a recommendation, the group limited itself to describing university status as a possibility:

The present report recommends that the overarching objectives of the merger must be that the new university college will have the possibility to become a university with vocational-oriented study programmes (p. 30, italics in original).
This was how the workgroup dealt with the disagreement about how to express the university ambition. By stating that university status was a possibility, it was expected to be less provocative to those opposing the idea of becoming a university:

We solved the problem in workgroup one by saying that the new university college has the goal of eventually becoming a university. But this formulation was chosen to hide the divergent views about this goal: Vestfold and Buskerud saw it as an explicit aim to achieve university status, while Østfold had strong reservations. So the disagreement on this issue was much stronger than can be seen from the report.

(Member of the board, Østfold University College)

In the support discourse there was a push to state a clear ambition to become a university. In the opposition discourse there was a push to *not* state that ambition. A compromise was made when the ambition was reduced to stating that the new university college would “eventually” want to become a university, and that university status was a “possibility”. How the issue of university ambition was handled in the report was equal to how it was handled in the first report I discussed in Act one. By downplaying the importance of university ambition the workgroup hoped to minimise the risk for conflict. What happened, though, were negative reactions to the downplaying of ambition. This became very clear in the consultative statements, as we will discover later in this act.

The workgroup acknowledged the fact that academic drift could be a problem, admitting that “the normative principle that the integration of research and education is a good thing could be questioned” (p. 30). Research and education are both discursively and non-discursively separated in the university and the non-university sector. Universities have traditionally been research focused while university colleges have been teacher focused. However, as a result of academic drift this line is blurred, as university colleges become increasingly more research oriented. Having university ambitions is to admit that research is an important part of what a university college does and how resources within the university college should be allocated. This places tension between the ideas of being a teacher-based higher education institution and being a research-based one, and in effect also tension between a modern and a traditional perspective:
The complexity of professional programmes with a double anchoring both in academia and in vocational fields becomes evident when one has university ambitions (p. 30).

Academic drift in the non-university higher education sector creates a struggle between teaching and research. It causes tensions between academics (Humphreys & Brown, 2002) and is what Boyer (1990, p. 16) refers to as the “tired old teaching versus research debate”. This identity struggle occurs on different levels. On an individual level it depends on whether employees have their background primarily from the practice field and see themselves as teachers educating students to be professionals within a specific area, or whether they have a background from the academic field of the universities. On a faculty level there might be differences as well. There are historical differences between the former district colleges on the one hand and the former teacher training, nursing and engineering colleges on the other. In the restructuring reform of 1994 these colleges were merged into state university colleges taking their old culture with them. The district colleges were more research oriented than the others leading to cultural conflicts visible even today. On an organisational level some university colleges have focused more on research than others. University colleges like the present University of Agder and the University of Stavanger have taken the full step to become universities, while others are quite content with a main focus on educating students on an undergraduate level.

These differences were obvious in the merger process between Buskerud, Vestfold and Østfold. Buskerud and Vestfold had university ambition as part of their strategic plan, while Østfold did not. This was a manifestation of different academic ambitions and a difference in how academic drift was viewed. The different academic ambitions were a dilemma for the workgroup:

Following two of the three institutions’ resolution, the third institution could experience it as undesirable interference, relative to a future internal clarification. Following the third institution’s position, representatives from the other two could experience that their decisions, aspirations and strategic work were disregarded and ambitions weakened (p. 31).
No matter how the workgroup described the university ambition in the report, it could be provocative. The choice of downplaying the university ambition was a deliberate strategic move in the process. However, how this was received in the three university colleges became clear in the consultative statements.

**Consultative statements (Buskerud)**

There were a total of 19 consultative statements from Buskerud. They came from faculties, departments, administrative units, unions, and the student organisation. All faculties explicitly stated that the main goal for the new organisation was to become a university. Another three consultative statements supported that goal while nine consultative statements did not address the issue of university ambition, and one expressed that it did not belong in the report and therefore, they did not address it. The argument for having the goal of becoming a university was to strengthen the new institution’s attractiveness, status and basis for external funding. Being a university was also seen as strengthening opportunities for international orientation both in relation to teaching/training, research, development and innovation, and student and employee exchange. The goal to become a university was described as reflecting an academic development, which in other words means academic drift. The response to academic drift was to accept it and adapt to it. This was described as necessary in order to be competitive for the best students and employees.

Both the discourse on academic drift and education market was apparent in the consultative statements. The idea of the merger was to become a university, and discourses of academic drift and market were used to support that idea. One of the main advantages of being a university instead of a university college is that the institution itself can initiate study programmes on all levels without seeking accreditation from The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT). This was perceived as an increase in institutional autonomy as well as a competitive advantage.

As I described above there were four main academic areas suggested in the report, 1) Business, Social and Information Science, 2) Education Science, Humanities, and Arts, 3) Technology, Computer Science, and Maritime Science, and 4) Health and Social Science. All consultative statements supported these main areas. Several of the consultative statements suggested that the faculties representing the main areas should be named after the main
areas. The suggestion was to name them School of Business, School of Education, School of Engineering, and School of Health Care and Social Sciences. In the consultative statements it was referred to the relationship between strategic objectives and study programmes. Overarching strategic objectives should permeate all institutional priorities, both academically and in administration, and be operationalised within the whole width of academic activity. However, some areas like the development of master's and PhDs were regarded as particularly important. The establishment of PhD programmes should initially be prioritised in accordance with the main areas.

The message these consultative statements expressed can be summarised in three points. Firstly, the idea of the merger was rooted in an ambition to become a university. Secondly, operationalisation in the form of developing PhD programmes was a consequence of the university ambition. Hence the idea was a premise for the operationalisation. Thirdly, the establishment of PhD programmes should be prioritised in accordance with the suggested main academic areas. This meant that there was a correlation between the PhDs under development at Buskerud and Vestfold, the suggested four main academic areas, and the understanding of prioritisation. In other words, the PhD programmes Buskerud was developing at the time should be prioritised in the merged university college.

The consultative statements were homogenous in their textual construction. Some of them used exactly the same text, indicating coordination between the authors writing the consultative statements. The consultative statement from the leader group was signed by the Rector, the two Vice Rectors, the Director and the five Deans. The consultative statements from administrative units and the five faculties were very similar. Different parts of the organisation clearly worked in a coordinated manner on how to present its views. It gave an impression of Buskerud as very “coordinated” in their approach to the other merger partners. From Buskerud’s perspective this was a sign of unity. It was explained as an expression of having a mutual goal driving the merger process. In other discursive practices, primarily expressed from Østfold, the coordinated approach from Buskerud was seen as a sign of censorship and a top-down process. It was contrasted to Østfold’s democratic and open approach to the merger process. However, what was described as open and democratic by Østfold, was described as uncontrolled by Buskerud.
Consultative statements (Vestfold)

Where the consultative statements at Buskerud were very homogenous with some parts being exactly the same, the consultative statements from Vestfold were more heterogeneous. A total of 12 consultative statements from faculties, administrative units, unions, and the student organisation were produced.

In the consultative statement from the Faculty of Humanities and Education there were expressions of doubt towards the merger. The Department of Humanities and Social science didactics was tentative and somewhat negative to the merger:

Most expressed scepticism to the project, mainly because we miss a financial report showing that the merger does not cost more than it tastes (p. 1).

This means a focus on operationalisation, in this case the question of costs. The idea of becoming a university was not perceived as a clear-cut one. On the contrary:

As far as we can see, university ambition seems to be what motivates the merger plans even though this has not been made clear in the reports we have received so far (p. 1).

The understanding is that university status was the motivation for merger although this was not clearly stated. This understanding could be a result of the downplaying of the university ambition in the report. Instead of reaffirming university status as the main objective for the merger, as the consultative statements from Buskerud did, the idea of university status was pointed out as missing. In the consultative statement from the Faculty of Business and Social Science the university ambition came up as the first issue. The university ambition was supported but there was criticism about the way it was downplayed in the report:

The university ambition must be clarified. This vision must be emphasised and come first. It should be the first bullet point in the introduction to the report (p. 1).

This position was based on arguments related both to a market discourse of competition for students and employees between higher education institutions,
and to a discourse of academic drift where there is a risk of a division between A-level universities and B-level university colleges. Several consultative statements commented on the way the university ambition was described in the report. As the previous examples above indicate, the main focus was on clarifying the ambition. It was expected that the ambition to become a university should be more clearly stated. The absence of a clearly stated ambition of university status was criticised, which indicates that the idea of becoming a university was supported, as was clearly shown in one consultative statement that suggested a vision of becoming a university before 2015. Here the ambition was time-framed and in that way made more tangible.

The university ambition was what justified the merger, and to merge three university colleges into a new institution without university ambitions was considered to be a step in the wrong direction. Most consultative statements supported the ambition to become a university and downplaying this ambition in the report was criticised. With regard to the university ambition, the main difference between the consultative statements from Buskerud and the consultative statements from Vestfold was that the former took the initiative and explicitly defined the ambition in the consultative statements, while in the latter case the response was limited to criticism. In the consultative statement from the local branch of The Norwegian Association of Researchers (a trade union) there was a comment that the report was very consensus based, which contributed to hiding disagreement. As I described above, toning down disagreements within the workgroups was a deliberate choice made by the workgroup. By toning down, or masking, disagreement and constructing a text that conveyed consensus where there was none, the interpretation of issues such as the university ambition was left to the reader. At Buskerud this led to consultative statements stating it as an explicit goal, at Vestfold the vagueness was criticised, and at Østfold the university ambition was supported by some and rejected by others.

**Consultative statements (Østfold)**

There were a total of 23 consultative statements from Østfold. They came from faculties, departments, administrative units, unions, and the student organisation.

The Faculty of Health and Social Sciences and the Faculty of Engineering were headed by the same dean at the time when the consultative statements were
written, and they were therefore delivered as a joint consultative statement. There was general support for developing academic capacity so that ambitions to become a university could be met. However, it was pointed out that university status in itself should not be a goal and that one should proceed stepwise. University status was seen more as a consequence of incremental development than a premise for the merger. The Faculty of Business, Languages and Social Sciences commented that an important element of the vision was an unambiguous and clear statement of the university ambition. They provided an example:

The university college has a clear objective to develop the institution to a vocational and employment-oriented regional university.

The formulation of this vision resembles the vision stated by Buskerud that the main idea of the merger was to become a university. It was the university ambition that gave meaning to the merger. The Faculty of Computer Science also supported the idea of becoming a university, describing it as the right course of action. However, the workgroup’s suggestion of an academic profile with four main areas was described as going way beyond its mandate. It was seen as inappropriate interference from the workgroup while a different workgroup focusing on academic organisation was still in progress. By suggesting four faculties – one connected to each of the main areas – the workgroup was accused of jumping to conclusions. This was a point also made in other consultative statements. Linking main academic profiles to a specific faculty structure was described as not part of the workgroup’s mandate.

The Faculty of Education understood the ambition to become a university as a long-term goal where undergraduate programmes would not be affected by realising a university ambition. The university ambition was not rejected, but it was described as a consequence rather than a premise for the merger. The local Norwegian Association of Researchers expressed concern regarding the university ambition. They noted that the report was based on an idea that a merged university college should aim for university status in a given timeframe. It surprised them that this ambition was so salient in the report. They had an understanding of the merger process that involved that at this stage the question of university status should be put aside. They also pointed out that the issue of university ambition had not been thoroughly discussed at Østfold and that it would create reactions if that objective appeared as a vision.
without such discussion having taken place. The local branch of Norwegian Association of Researchers stated that they were of the opinion that it was better to be a strong university college than a weak university.

This construction of meaning rejects the notion of universities always being better than university colleges. Instead it draws on the traditional binary system separating the university and the non-university sectors. It draws on the original intent of the construction of the non-university sector where universities and university colleges are equal but different. From this perspective a university college can be qualitatively “better” than a university. This is in line with my concept of the traditional perspective as opposed to the modern perspective that always sees universities as better than university colleges.

The university ambition was not explicitly rejected in the consultative statements from Østfold. However, it was pointed out that the ambition of becoming a university should not affect other study programmes. It was seen as better to build up the capacity for university status first and then apply for university status when the time was right. Concern about negative consequences of a university ambition was put forward. A possible university status was described more as a consequence of than a premise for the merger in most of the consultative statements. One exception was the consultative statement from the Faculty of Business, Languages and Social Sciences that asked for a clearer vision stating that university ambition was the whole intention of the merger. In conjunction with the idea of university status, operationalisation factors like costs were described. The university ambition was conditioned. It was conditioned by a request not to weaken undergraduate programmes, acceptable costs, and keeping a local profile. If all conditions were met the ambition to become a university would be accepted. University status was therefore seen as a possible consequence if a certain set of conditions were met. In the consultative statements from Buskerud the university ambition was a premise for merger and as such unconditioned by operationalisation factors.

**University status as a consequence of a merger**

What we have discussed so far regarding the ambition of becoming a university is seeing university status as a premise for merger. In this case the construction of meaning can be ordered in the sequential process of; "we want
to become a university therefore we have to merge”. There would be no reason to initiate the merger process in the first place if the objective was not to become a university. We have also discussed the dismissal of the idea to become a university. In this case there may be support for a merger but not as a means to achieve university status.

In the discursive construction of university status as a consequence of a merger the idea to become a university is accepted. What is not accepted is the sequence. The order is rather; “we want to merge and may become a university in due time”. This is not a question of semantics. It is a completely different construction of meaning that goes to the very core of how support and opposition were constructed. In the first case the means of how to reach the goal of university status – what I refer to as operationalisation – is subordinate to the goal. In other words, why is more important than how. In the latter case the operationalisation of developing PhD programmes and building robust education and research environments is considered more important than the idea of becoming a university. Here the idea is subordinate to the operationalisation. In other words, how is more important than why. These are analytically separated discursive practices and not to be seen as static opinions represented by individuals. This means that one individual could use either discursive practice, that of support or opposition, depending on the discursive event. In one setting one of these practices could be used, while in another the other practice could be used. The downplaying of university ambition in the reports is an example of how these discourses were intertwined. A member of the board at Østfold explained how he perceived Buskerud and Vestfold in the matter of university ambition:

For example, in the proposed vision statement that we were to comment on, it was quite clear that for Buskerud and Vestfold the goal of achieving university status was important. The impression was that the motivation for merging was to become a university.

(Member of the board, Østfold University College)

Discourses of support and opposition were assigned to the university colleges. The construction of meaning in this case is that Buskerud and Vestfold equal a position where university ambition is seen as a premise for merger. This creates an illusion of objective positioning where Buskerud and Vestfold supported the merger and Østfold was opposed to it. I would argue that
instead we should think of this as discursive construction of meaning representing a certain perspective. To explain what I mean we can take a look at this statement from a manager at Vestfold:

There was a controversy how explicit we should be regarding the professional ambitions in the direction of a university. We ended up with some kind of compromise. As the Rector of Vestfold said: we don’t have to use the term university ambition. What we can say is that we aim to build powerful and robust academic milieus that can carry doctoral programmes.

(Manager, Vestfold University College)

In this case the construction of meaning was that university status should come as a consequence of the merger. Or is that really the case? Could this be interpreted as a tactical use of language to delude Østfold into a merger? Regardless of intention, how university status was constructed as a premise or consequence conditioned the construction of support and opposition. The construction of meaning regarding university ambition and how it was linked to the university colleges contributed to the polarisation between the university colleges as either for or against a merger. Another issue that contributed to the antagonism between Buskerud and Vestfold on the one hand and Østfold on the other was the due diligence.

**The due diligence**

A due diligence is an investigation of a business prior to signing a contract. In mergers due diligence are commonly conducted to assess merger partners’ financial situation. It is performed in order to gather information that can both affect the decision to merge and also influence negotiations. A due diligence normally focuses on financial aspects, but it can be extended to include a number of factors that are considered assets to an organisation (McDonald, Coulthard, & De Lange, 2005).

Østfold University College wanted a due diligence process conducted by an independent external auditor to get a thorough understanding of the three merger partners’ financial situation. Buskerud and Vestfold argued that such a due diligence was unnecessary since the official numbers were already publicly available. They did not see the point in spending money on a task that could be undertaken for free internally.
In the end, Østfold paid for the due diligence and, in addition, undertook its own additional analysis of the data produced by the auditor. In this analysis it was concluded that Vestfold was in a strained economic situation. In short, the analysis described Østfold as a higher education institution with sound and solid finances, while the other two, especially Vestfold, faced considerable financial challenges.

This, in turn, provoked the other two university colleges leading to a conflict amongst the parties that came to involve the Ministry of Education as well. However, instead of backing up Østfold University College, the Ministry of Education criticised Østfold for having too much money left on their annual budget. This is a classic public sector conundrum (in Norway and elsewhere), as publicly funded higher education institutions’ revenues are not a goal in themselves (this is often referred to as ‘postponed activities’) (Stensaker et al., in press). Rather, the opposite holds true, for example, if/when public appropriations are not spent according to the budgeted activities, this can be seen as if the ‘social mandate’ has not been fulfilled, thus leading to an erosion of trust by the main funder, for example the state on behalf of society.

In defence, it was argued from Østfold’s side that economic resources are crucial in a merger process, and that, instead of criticism, the Ministry should lend its support towards a financial due diligence. In spite of the fact that the Ministry did not support a university ambition as the goal of the merger, and although it considered financial matters to be of central importance, seen from Østfold’s perspective, the central authorities were perceived to side with Buskerud and Vestfold in the conflict:

There have been many insidious ways of doing things. Like when Vestfold and Buskerud ran to The Ministry of Education immediately after the due-diligence report was known, for example. And they got to them to say that this is not correct.

(Student leader, Østfold University College)

In a letter from the Ministry of Education to Østfold (dated 7 February 2012) a number of issues critiquing Østfold were pointed out. Firstly, it was stated that the analysis presenting Vestfold in financial dire straits was inaccurate, the argument being that Vestfold’s financial position was much better than what Østfold’s auditing report gave the impression of.
Secondly, although it was acknowledged that it is important to put money aside for future investments, it was indicated that this sum should not be too large so as not to jeopardise ongoing operations and core activities. According to the Ministry, Østfold’s case fitted this latter situation.

Thirdly, it was argued that the financial focus in the context of a future merger should not rest on the current financial situation. Although it was important that all three partners had balanced budgets at the time of the merger; according to the Ministry, the focus should be on “a realistic and documented long-term budget for the three institutions for the period 2013-2015” which was the period after the merger had been completed.

Furthermore, in the letter the Ministry emphasised its role as legally responsible for all higher education institutions in Norway stating that, it “is the Ministry of Education’s duty to follow up closely the institutions’ financial management, which we have also done”. In other words, Østfold’s analysis of the due diligence was not seen as a constructive contribution to the merger process, but as a serious interference in the legal mandate of the Ministry (as regards system oversight and accountability).

Let us take a step back and see how meaning was constructed by the different positions in the case of the due diligence. It is important to remember that the division of meaning construction did not simply follow divisions of education institution. It was not as everyone at Østfold shared the same worldview, or everyone at Buskerud and Vestfold did. The most recognisable difference in worldview at Østfold was that the administrative management and Pro-Rector were on one side and Rector on the other. Østfold’s rector fully supported the merger. She did that all the way through the merger process, and when the opposition discourse became dominant at Østfold she and a few others were the only ones still actively supporting the merger.

The due diligence was an important factor in the hegemonic change from a discourse of support to a discourse of opposition at Østfold because it conveyed a discourse of resources and resource allocation. Firstly, it presented a worldview where Østfold had a lot of money and Vestfold did not. As we have seen, this worldview was heavily criticised, not only by Buskerud and Vestfold but also by the Ministry of Education.
Secondly, when the financial situation was linked to the allocation of PhD programmes the narrative in the opposition discourse was that “they want our money to finance their PhD programmes”. As there was scarce support at Østfold for the idea of becoming a university it was easy to link these two aspects. The difference in university ambition at Østfold and the other two merger partners in combination with the difference in financial status increased the discursive difference between the university colleges. What was antagonism between support and opposition became antagonism between Østfold on one side, and the other two on the other.

So, what were the main reasons presented by Østfold to undertake a due diligence? First of all it was a question of transparency and communication. Communication has been described as the most important factor in a merger (Appelbaum et al., 2000), and Østfold claimed they only wanted to know the facts. In previous consultative statements the concern about costs was obvious. There was no clear picture of the three university colleges’ financial situation apart from the fact that they had all committed themselves to be in balance by the time of the merger. Nor were there any calculations of the costs of establishing and operating the PhD programmes.

From Østfold’s perspective undertaking a due diligence was a way of being able to make an informed decision. All three university colleges were in different phases with regard to campus restructuring and academic development. This made it difficult to get a full picture of the respective university college’s financial position. The Chief Financial Officer at Østfold explains the reason for the due diligence:

Østfold probably has some assumptions, or desires to understand what’s going on in Vestfold, because the picture is difficult to grasp.

(Chief Financial Officer, Østfold University College)

It was argued that using an external audit company would secure transparency and neutrality, which would benefit the merger process. The company chosen to undertake the due diligence was Ernst & Young. From Østfold’s perspective the intentions were the best. It was not about making “us” look good and “them” look bad; it was about gathering knowledge about the situation. There was little controversy around the report produced by Ernst & Young, although
there was some controversy on how to conduct a due-diligence in the higher education sector:

When the report came there was a long process where we had to spend a lot of time and involve the Ministry of Education and Research to show that the report was incorrect in a number of ways because of misunderstandings in how to read and interpret accounting within the government sector.

(Rector, Vestfold University College)

The university college director and chief financial officer at Østfold University College were not satisfied with the report and used the report as a foundation for continuing the analysis. What they did was to gather information from the board at Vestfold. Minutes from board meetings are publicly available through the university college website. These minutes were used to undertake a more thorough analysis. The result was presented to the board at Østfold and to employees at faculty meetings. What the director and chief financial officer did was to link the three university colleges’ financial situation to costs in developing and operating PhD programmes. This was the first time economy was presented in such a concrete way and it made things more tangible. Having “hard facts” made it easier to make up one’s mind about the merger. One of the board members at Østfold says this about a board meeting where the due diligence was presented:

Some board members said that this was the first time that they had got a comprehensive overview. Not only did they get an overview of the financial situation, but the director also pointed out that Vestfold and Buskerud were developing three new doctoral degree programmes in addition to the one already in existence. This was known and I knew it perfectly well, but now it was put in context. He gave figures for what it would cost to operate these programmes.

(Member of the board, Østfold University College)

Linking the two aspects of financial situation and costs of PhDs was a discursive practice where these two aspects were set against each other. The worldview presented by Østfold was that of difference in financial solidity. Østfold had a solid economy while Vestfold did not.

When this worldview was connected to the costs of developing and operating PhD programmes, and further connected to the idea of becoming a university,
the narrative of “we at Østfold will have to pay to reach a goal we do not share” was constructed. In the dominant discourse of opposition at Østfold it was argued against working towards the idea of university status. The construction of meaning was based on rationality and of having as much information as possible about the matter before an informed decision could be made (March, 1994).

It is noteworthy that in this discourse the decision to merge had not yet been made. From a discourse position in which the merger process was about finding out whether to merge or not it made perfect sense to perform a due diligence. Although it was argued that the due diligence and the subsequent analysis were in the interest of all three university colleges, there were voices arguing that the result should have been used in the negotiations:

> There was plenty of turbulence around the economy, but it was never used as a strategic advantage for Østfold University College in such a way as to claim that on the basis of the economic situation we must have specific requirements for what the merged entity would look like. It was never connected to strategic requirements.

(Member of the board, Østfold University College)

What this board member does here is linking the due diligence to the negotiations. This construction of meaning reveals how he asserts an inwards perspective. The “advantageous” economic position Østfold had in relation to the other two university colleges was to be used as leverage to position Østfold in the merged university college. From this perspective, positioning and competition are in relation to the merger partners instead of in relation to a wider market. I will discuss the inwards perspective more thoroughly later in this chapter.

Why were Buskerud and Vestfold so agitated by the due diligence? First of all, Buskerud did not come out as badly as Vestfold did in Østfold’s post-analysis. They therefore did not react as strongly as Vestfold did. What provoked Vestfold, were mainly two things. Firstly, the numbers presented in the analysis were seen as totally incorrect. According to Vestfold, Østfold had made their calculations based on a worst-case scenario that was not likely to come true. Secondly, the way the analysis was done was seen as an unfriendly invasion of Vestfold’s integrity. The fact that Østfold gathered information
from Vestfold and used it to analyse Vestfold without even informing them of what they were doing was seen as an act of hostility:

And that’s something that does not go unpunished in the sector, nor in the Ministry. It is the Ministry’s responsibility to assess each institution. It is almost as if someone were going into your personal finances without you knowing about it and presented it to a larger public. And it invoked strong reactions at Vestfold and Buskerud.

(Rector, Østfold University College).

When Østfold presented their analysis to the rector, director and chief financial officer at Vestfold they were provoked by what they saw. Both the fact that Østfold continued with their own analysis based on the report from Ernst & Young without informing the other two merger partners, and the numbers presented, created a bad climate between the organisations. Vestfold and Buskerud chose to inform the Ministry of Education about the situation. Bringing the Ministry of Education into the conflict was seen as unnecessary by Østfold.

If we try to untangle all the threads in this event we can start by looking at the discursive construction of economic solidity. When the administration at Østfold suggested the due diligence it was met with reluctance from Buskerud and Vestfold. Østfold drew on a discourse of transparency where the due diligence would add to the knowledge needed in order to be able to make an informed decision whether to merge or not. However, from Buskerud and Vestfold’s point of view there was already transparency. All financial numbers were already publicly available and therefore a due diligence was not considered necessary.

The question one could ask is why did not Buskerud and Vestfold agree to the due diligence anyway? From an instrumental perspective one answer could be there was no logic in spending money on something you could get for free. This was a common answer when I talked to people from Buskerud and Vestfold. Another answer could be that undertaking a due diligence as a way of gathering information to make a decision would mean a decision to merge had not already been made. Formally this was the case. The final merger decision was to be made after the final report written by the three rectors. However, the understanding that a de facto merger decision had already been made when the decision to start the investigation phase was made, rendered it debatable to
do a due diligence; there was no need to undertake a due diligence if the decision to merge had already been made. Of course the decision had not been made, but that does not mean there were not discursive practices constructed on the basis that a decision had been made. I discussed the understanding of the merger process in more detail in chapter 6. Discursive practices are constructed on the basis of worldviews, and those worldviews are relative.

A third answer why Buskerud and Vestfold were negative to the due diligence could be its linkage to power. It is not the due diligence itself that links to power but the way it was used to do further analysis and display Østfold as a university college with much better economy than Buskerud, and especially Vestfold. This way of constructing images of financial differences enables discursive practices of power. This in turn could condition negotiations between the three merger partners. As we saw above, Østfold was criticised by its own people for not using their financial status to their advantage in negotiations.

To reduce this power position, Buskerud and Vestfold argued that if there was going to be a due diligence it should not be restricted to a financial due diligence. Other assets such as number of full professors and other non-monetary resources should be included. This argument is in line with the suggestion from Eastman and Lang (2001, p. 205) that:

Institutions are well advised to adopt a broad definition of that to which due diligence must be applied – one encompassing academic health, regulatory compliance, and so on, as well as financial condition.

The tension between Buskerud and Vestfold on the one hand and Østfold on the other was described by a manager at Vestfold using a marriage metaphor:

If you are getting married and the woman you are engaged to hires a lawyer to go through your private finances, at least you would like to be given the opportunity to comment on it yourself. And then she informs people around her and you don’t know what she is saying, and you get no opportunity to comment. And it turns out later that the information provided was grossly incorrect. I’m referring to the board at Østfold; it’s clear that it is difficult to continue a process that requires trust.

(Manager, Vestfold University College)

In this quote the manager at Vestfold uses the marriage metaphor to describe the conflict caused by the due diligence report. A marriage is built on trust, and
what Østfold did concerning the due diligence was seen as a betrayal. In this metaphor the marriage is the merger. The woman is Østfold. The lawyer is the audit company Ernst & Young that was hired by Østfold to perform the due diligence. After Ernst & Young had submitted their report the administration at Østfold University College continued a process of investigating the finances of Buskerud and Vestfold. As described above a revised report was produced by the administration at Østfold on the basis of the findings. They informed all faculties of Østfold University College about these findings. This is what the manager means when he says “and then she informs people around her and you don’t know what she is saying”.

Buskerud and Vestfold argued that they did not get a chance to comment on the report produced by Østfold. Especially Vestfold reacted strongly to this, claiming that the balance sheet at Vestfold later showed that the estimates made by Østfold were “grossly incorrect”. As a consequence of the way Østfold handled the due diligence, the trust between the merger partners suffered a terrible blow. According to the respondent a merger, like a marriage, is built on trust. Therefore a due diligence is not needed. The discursive practice in this use of the marriage metaphor is an example of how the idea took precedence over operationalisation. Operationalisation in the form of a due diligence was considered unnecessary in favour of the idea of marriage based on love.

The financial status at the three university colleges was what it was. What differed was the discursive construction of a dichotomy of rich and poor on the one hand, and a discursive construction of Østfold being too rich on the other. Having too much money in the budget by the end of the fiscal year was in the latter case described as not fulfilling its purpose as a higher education institution. State-funded institutions such as university colleges are supposed to make use of their annual budget. Although the Ministry of Education accepts the saving of some money for future investments, this sum is not allowed to be too large. In Østfold’s case the sum was so large that the Ministry of Education criticised Østfold rather than acknowledging the solid finances. The case of the due diligence indicates how one specific event can be discursively constructed into either support or opposition.

**What about those PhDs?**

So far I have briefly discussed the PhDs and explained that in order to achieve university status at least four PhD programmes in different areas need to be in
operation. The discussion on what study programmes a university college should offer is not new. Lachs (1965, p. 122) argued that “the introduction of isolated master’s programs is the first halting step of the college in the direction of becoming a University”. This is strikingly similar to the arguments of introducing PhD programmes to achieve university status. In this section I will discuss how discourses of support and opposition were constructed in the context of the PhDs.

There had been a focus on the development of PhD programmes from the outset of the merger process. However, it was not until after the due diligence, when costs were directly related to the operationalisation of academic ambitions in the form of PhD programmes, that the opposition discourse really started to become dominant at Østfold.

As I have described earlier, one PhD programme was in operation at Vestfold and another under development. Buskerud did not have any PhDs in operation but two under development. Østfold did not have any established PhDs and none under development. Two issues became important regarding the development of PhDs. The first was the question of who “owned” the PhD programmes. From an outwards perspective the PhD programmes were owned by all three university colleges as the discursive practice centred round a notion of “we”, meaning the merged university college. From an inwards perspective, focusing on competition between the merger partners, the ownership of PhD programmes belonged to those who developed them. They were seen as assets in a game of positioning. The other issue was related to whether the development of PhDs should be stopped and then reset when the merger process started. I start by discussing ownership and then move on to discussing the continuation of the development of the PhD programmes. I then conclude this section by discussing whether PhDs were seen as either strengthening or weakening bachelor’s and master’s programmes.

Ownership
From an outwards perspective where “we” was construed as the merged university college, the PhDs belonged to everyone. As long as the idea of university status was supported, the development of PhDs was seen as a good thing, contributing to the objective of achieving university status. This was expressed by the rector at Vestfold as:
We've always assumed that these PhDs will be the merged university college's PhDs and that it is an academical gain for all involved institutions to bring them into the merger.

(Rector, Vestfold University College)

The logic behind the argument that the PhDs would belong to the merged university college was that the PhDs were anchored in the faculties, and a faculty transcended several campuses. This relates to who “we” and “they” are construed in a competitive education market. “We” are the merged university college, and “they” are other higher education institutions. Any new PhD would therefore belong to “us”, meaning the merged university college. Since a PhD would belong to a faculty rather than to the university college that developed it, the location of faculty management was not important:

A faculty will benefit from a PhD. I mean, all faculties are represented in the three old institutions. As an example, a PhD in health science will be just as much associated with the milieu in Fredrikstad [Østfold] and Bakkenteigen [Vestfold] as it will be in Drammen [Buskerud] where faculty management was suggested to be located.

(Manager, Buskerud University College)

In the support discourse there was no understanding of why the development of PhDs could be understood as something bad. The link between the idea of university status and the operationalisation of developing PhDs was obviously a good thing:

The fact that we establish and seek accreditation for PhDs, isn't that an advantage for everyone in the end? How could that become a thing that made this crash?

(Manager, Buskerud University College)

The construction of meaning in this case is that questioning the PhDs is incomprehensible because they are an advantage for everyone. This holds true as long as the idea of becoming a university is supported and you are not in a disadvantageous power position. However, if the idea is not supported, PhDs are not seen as an advantage, as they function as means to becoming a university. In addition they are not seen as an advantage, even if the university ambition is supported, as long as they impede one’s power position. The
The quotation above also shows how people are unaware of other discursive practices than their own. When a discourse holds a hegemonic position it becomes “common sense” and the “natural” way of seeing things (Fairclough, 1992). This explains why different discursive positions can be incommensurable.

In the opposition discourse the development of PhDs was seen as something the three university colleges should have done together, in collaboration. When it was argued that the PhDs would be joint PhDs owned by the new university college, it was rejected in the construction of the opposition claiming that “real” ownership of the PhDs would belong to those developing them:

It wasn’t just that Buskerud and Vestfold had defined goals, they were also developing the means to reach those goals: they were developing their own, separate PhD programmes. The intention was not that we should develop these programmes together. Everyone understands that a PhD programme will be offered in the name of the institution, and not in the name of a specific campus, but the programme will, nevertheless, be ‘owned’ by those who have developed it.

(University College Director, Østfold University College)

The PhD programmes would be owned by the developing faculty and not by all. From this perspective it was clear that although everyone knew that the PhDs would be joint programmes, those developing them would have a special ownership of them. Because the PhD programmes were initiated and developed before the merger process started, Østfold was robbed from the opportunity to participate in their development. From this perspective the intention was to build the merged university college together and developing PhD programmes was a part of that.

In addition there was dissent on the goal. Buskerud and Vestfold laid the foundation for the new university college without Østfold when they started the development of PhD programmes. If there had been consensus at Østfold on the university ambition, this might not have been a big problem. In that case Buskerud and Vestfold would just have made it easier to reach that goal. When Østfold did not get involved in the development of PhDs and did not share the ambition to become a university, it became difficult to accept the merger. This brings us to the question whether the PhD programmes should have been stopped or reset when the merger process started, and then developed in collaboration.
**Continue the development until merger or not**

There were two colliding constructions of meaning regarding the development of PhD programmes. The first was linked to the construction of support and the second to the construction of opposition. From the support perspective the development of PhDs had been going on for many years. Having a long history was used as an argument not to stop developing PhDs when the merger process started:

That they have come further than us with PhDs is something we have known all along. At least I've known it all along and it's not like it has been a secret. But I think for some it may have come as a surprise. I remember one person who expressed that now they should shelve or dismiss these plans and then we'll start over again together, and I mean considering they have worked on this for many, many years, that's completely insane.

(Rector, Østfold University College)

In the construction of support it was a well-known fact that Buskerud and Vestfold had come far in developing PhD programmes. It was no secret that they were doing that, still, it might have come as a surprise to some people at Østfold. From this perspective the idea of stopping the development of PhD programmes was absurd. Resetting everything and starting over again would be a waste of time and resources. Buskerud and Vestfold had been working for many years developing these programmes. It was argued that those who suggested that the development should stop probably did not know how long it takes to develop these kinds of study programmes. In the construction of support, resetting the development of PhDs was seen as insane because they had come far, and resetting them would only lead to a delay in becoming a university. This argument is constructed around two things. The first is the use of time framing. The continuation of the development is justified by having started the development before the merger process started. The second is that it is the means to reach a wanted goal. It is justified by rationality. If university ambition is the prime goal of merging, anything delaying that goal will not be accepted. What happened was that the idea of achieving university status took precedence over the operationalisation of stopping the development of PhDs. In the construction of support the development of the PhDs was justified by its history:
It started *long ago*, right. It’s not like one, as a new university college, has started to prioritise and delegate tasks. But that’s how it was made to seem by Østfold. Like we sort of started to go in for these two [PhDs] on our side, and it doesn’t work out for Østfold. I think it is a completely unreasonable argument, because this work was initiated a long, long, long time ago. And if we as a university college had ambitions, especially since the merger process had not come very far, it can’t be bloody wrong to have ambitions.

(Student leader, Vestfold University College)

It was started “long ago” and as such it precedes the merger process. Criticising Buskerud and Vestfold for developing their PhD programmes was seen as unreasonable. Firstly, it was unreasonable because the development of PhD programmes started long before the merger process started. Secondly, it was unreasonable because having ambitions to develop PhD programmes cannot be wrong, especially since there was still no decision to merge. The logic was that since Vestfold started this before the merger process started, and there was no formal decision to merge, they should not be criticised for continuing the development. As a consequence there was nothing wrong in continuing to develop PhDs when the merger process started.

Not only were the PhDs part of the merged university college and as such would belong to everyone. In addition the development was justified by the fact that no formal decision had been made. Although there was no admittance in the support discourse of positioning oneself in relation to the merger partners, the arguments used in the development of PhDs indicate such positioning. This could be interpreted as a deliberate tactic to separate what you say and what you actually do (Brunsson, 2002). But it can also be interpreted as a subconscious use of power overshadowed by the very strongly articulated argument for the idea behind the merger. The idea of university ambition in this way took precedence over the operationalisation. The discursive focus is therefore on the idea. That does not in any way make matters regarding the operationalisation less important. The dialectic relationship between idea and operationalisation is very much in play here.

In the construction of opposition the development of PhDs should be stopped or reset when the merger process started:
From my point of view it would be natural for the rectors to say: let’s freeze this until we have consolidated our positions and considered a preliminary strategy for the new institution and how this fits in there and how the division of work should be.

(Director of Academic Affairs & Research, Østfold University College)

When the merger ambition was unclear it was important to ask the question: where do we go from here? From an opposition perspective it was seen as natural that the rectors stopped the development of initiated PhD programmes. The reason for that was to get an overview of the programmes in progress and decide on a joint strategy to continue. That did not happen and the development of the PhD programmes took a hold of the process. The development of PhD programmes was not initiated and led by the merger partners as a joint effort in the merger process; they were led by the university colleges that initiated them, and by local trade and industry. It was not possible to stop the development of the programmes later in the merger process, but in the construction of opposition they should have been stopped in the beginning.

The argument used in the support discourse that the PhD programmes had been an area of commitment since the 1980s and 1990s was dismissed in the opposition discourse. From this perspective there had been professional dreams since that period but they would be nothing but dreams until there was a formal decision, funding and part of a strategic plan. Claiming that the ambition to develop PhD programmes is 20 or 30 years old made them appear more legitimate; thus, in the support discourse it was important to point to the fact that the development of the PhDs started 20 or 30 years ago. In the opposition discourse this way of presenting the history was not perceived as correct. This discourse saw a difference in professional dreams and concrete strategic plans. Just saying that we want to develop PhD programmes does not qualify them to be an area of commitment. In the construction of opposition, what Buskerud and Vestfold did was strategic positioning:

Who should be in the professional driver’s seat, and it is not unnatural that it should be those who have the presumably best academic and research community. So there is competition for the driver’s seat concerning PhD degrees. First getting them, and secondly getting the professional driver’s seat where the engine is located.

(Director of Academic Affairs & Research, Østfold University College)
The driver's seat is a metaphor for being in control. To continue the metaphor: the driver has his “hands on the wheel”, a metaphor for steering and choosing the direction. The driver also decides the speed. In this case it is a metaphor for deciding at which pace the organisation is to move forward. Being in the professional driver's seat also means having the faculty management. Competition is described as something that goes on between individuals, professional groups, faculties and university colleges. In other words, this is an inwards perspective. In the quote the respondent argues that there is competition for developing PhDs. So the first step is to get the right to develop a PhD. The second step is to have the faculty management located where the PhD programmes are located. An engine is necessary to move forward, and the PhD programmes were seen as necessary to move the university college forward in order to become a university.

In the construction of opposition the development of PhD programmes was seen as a strategic positioning in the merger process. The development should have been stopped when the merger process started in order to consolidate the situation and continue the development as a joint project. Claiming that Buskerud and Vestfold had had plans for PhD programmes since the 1980s or 1990s was not seen as relevant, as they were considered “professional dreams”. In the opposition discourse the development of PhD programmes was a part of the internal competition between the merger partners. It all came down to the fact that those who have PhD programmes located at their campus also would have the faculty management, and that meant having power. In the construction of opposition it was also used an argument that the development of PhDs had not been known:

Then we learned that they had continued the development of their PhD programmes despite the fact that we were in a merger process, and they did not inform us about that. In a way we felt tricked.

(Student leader, Østfold University College)

As I described in Act one, there was no explicit description in the report “A comprehensive view II” on the development of PhDs. We now know that these PhDs had been under development since long before the merger process started, and that was also used as an argument in the construction of support. In the construction of opposition this was not known. This relates to the argument that the development of PhD programmes should have been
stopped. The story told in the construction of opposition was that Østfold did not know how far Buskerud and Vestfold had come in the development of their PhD programmes. When they learned about it, the development should have stopped for then to be continued as a joint project. The argument was that the starting point for the merger process in 2009 should also have been the starting point for developing PhD educations. The story told in the construction of support was that the development of PhD programmes started in 2005, long before the merger process started, therefore the development should continue. The PhD programmes would benefit all three partners on their way to becoming a university. As long as there had not been a formal decision to merge they were obligated to follow their strategy.

**Strengthening or weakening the bachelor’s and master’s programmes**

When the development of the PhDs became an issue, two different discourses of consequence arose. The first was that the consequence of developing and operating PhD programmes would strengthen lower level programmes such as bachelor’s programmes. The second was that it would weaken them. Let us start with the first where the development of PhD programmes was seen as strengthening bachelor’s and master’s programmes. The main argument was that the competence needed to operate doctoral programmes would “trickle down” on lower level study programmes. Professors hired to teach in a PhD programme were also expected to teach on bachelor and master level. Strengthened research competence was also seen as beneficial to lower level programmes. Financial resources needed to develop PhDs were seen as an investment in the overall quality of education.

In the discourse where lower level education would be weakened by the introduction of PhDs, resource allocation was seen as a zero-sum game. In a zero-sum game the sum of resources is constant; therefore PhDs would have direct consequences for bachelor’s programmes. PhDs are expensive and:

> In order to release this money we will have to reduce the width of programmes and courses we offer, and how far can we go before we get in conflict with regional needs for bachelor graduates in several areas?

(Director of Academic Affairs & Research, Østfold University College)

It was argued that the region needs students with a bachelor’s degree. Reducing bachelor’s programmes was seen as going against regional interests.
From this perspective there were worries about what the consequences would be for bachelor’s programmes when the PhD programmes were established. This argument is based on an understanding of university colleges as institutions with the purpose of serving regional, students’ and corporate interests. This aligns with the primary intention of establishing a non-university sector in the first place as well as with my concept of traditional perspective.

Understanding the development as a strengthening of bachelor’s and master’s programmes can be linked to the construction of support, where the idea took precedence over the operationalisation. This does not mean that developing PhDs are not operationalisation, of course it is. But the discursive focus was on the idea of becoming a university and as a consequence PhDs had to be developed. A very real consequence of developing PhDs could be the opportunity to further develop lower level study programmes but discursive construction of meaning does not always correspond to actions taken (Brunsson, 2006). Seeing the development as weakening the bachelor’s and master’s programmes can be linked to the construction of opposition where operationalisation took precedence over the idea. This was particularly apparent at Østfold that did not have any PhDs or PhDs under development:

If Østfold were to develop a PhD today it would to a large extent mean a prioritisation between bachelor and PhD.

(Chief Financial Officer, Østfold University College)

In the opposition discourse, that would mean a degradation of bachelor’s programmes. Since the bachelor’s programmes were understood to be the foundation and first priority of the university college, degradation was not an option.

**Inwards perspective**

In Act one I discussed the outwards perspective and how it was conditioned by discourses of education market and academic drift. From that perspective “we” was constructed as the merged university college and “they” as other higher education institutions. Now I turn to a very different use of the same concepts that were used in the outwards perspective, namely “competition”, “necessity”, “survival”, “positioning”, and “marginalisation”. The focal point in the
discursive practice of inwards perspective centred round the relationship between the three merger partners and the merger process rather than between the merged university college and other higher education institutions (Figure 8.1).

![Diagram: Inwards perspective]

Although the notion of an education market was not necessarily negated from an inwards perspective, competition was first and foremost something that took place between the merger partners. It was an acceptance of statement by K. Harman (2002, p. 107) that in "any merger there will be both winners and losers". Just as in the outwards perspective it was a competition for resources. But it was not a competition for students, staff and research funding. It was a competition to secure one's own university college's interests. These interests included the development of PhD programmes, geographical location of faculty management, and allocation of financial resources. Further, questions such as: On what campus is faculty management to be located? Where is Rector to be located? How will PhD programmes be funded, and who is paying for that? From this perspective, merger was considered a possibility but not a necessity. The university colleges could very well continue as independent higher education institutions. The risk of being closed down as a consequence of not going through with the merger was seen as unrealistic. What was necessary was to end up with a satisfying negotiation result.

The idea of a university college going bust was rejected and described as scare mongering. It was argued that students in general do not choose the "best" university or university college, they choose the one that offers the education they want and is closest to where they live. Survival was from this perspective linked to organisational identity. It was a question of whether the merger was
more an acquisition than a merger of equals, where the distinct features of one’s own organisation would get lost. This perspective is tightly linked to power, since being in a disadvantageous power position posed a potential threat to organisational identity. From an inwards perspective, positioning was in relation to the other university colleges rather than in relation to other higher education institutions. It was therefore a question of getting a negotiation result that was acceptable. Basically it was a question of “who gets what” in the merger. The risk of being marginalised in the merger process was a driving force for positioning. Positioning is a matter of power distribution. An inwards position perspective becomes relevant if one is in a disadvantageous power position. As power was connected to faculty management, the location of faculty heads became an aspect of positioning:

You may very well use the word naive. We have spent too little resources on positioning ourselves at the forefront of this.

(Chief Financial Officer, Østfold University College)

In this quote the Chief Financial Officer at Østfold talks about naivety. Østfold had not been clever enough in positioning themselves in relation to others. From an inwards perspective the development of PhD programmes is understood as a form of positioning. Østfold had not used enough resources prior to the merger initiative. On the one hand the development of PhD programmes was seen as a way of positioning and is therefore criticised, on the other hand there is no need to stop them because they are needed to become a university, and the whole purpose of merging is to become a university.

During an interview with a member of the board at Østfold we talked about how he perceived people from the other university colleges. He told me that:

I observed the way in which the representatives from Buskerud were positioning their institution. It was obvious that they had coordinated what they said with each other. For them it was important to emphasise the goal of achieving university status and to draw attention to their development of PhD programmes as well as to the ongoing process of academicizing their institution.

(Member of the board, Østfold University College)
From an inwards perspective it is not just a matter of describing one’s own actions as positioning. The “others” were also described in those terms. The construction of meaning based on an inwards perspective was used in the discursive practice of opposition. As the opposition discourse became prevalent at Østfold, the polarisation between the university colleges increased. What started to evolve was a strong polarisation between Østfold on one side – with a dominant discourse of opposition based on an inwards perspective, and Buskerud and Vestfold on the other – with a dominant discourse of support based on an outwards perspective.

**Summary**

What we have seen so far is that the report “Vision, academic profile and strategic objectives” was heavily conditioned by discourses of education market and academic drift. However, the pivotal key question of university status as the idea for merger was downplayed in the report. This was a deliberate strategy by the workgroup. The construction of support and opposition differed at the three university colleges. Although there were constructions of support and opposition at all three university colleges, one of the constructions held a hegemonic position as the dominant. At Buskerud the consultative statements showed a dominant support discourse explicitly stating that university status was what drove the merger. They were coordinated in their consultative statements with homogenous texts arguing for university status as a premise for a merger. At Vestfold there was also a dominant support discourse where the report was criticised for not being explicit enough regarding the university ambition. The consultative statements were less homogeneous and focused on operationalisation as well as the idea. Østfold was characterised by heterogeneous consultative statements and was much less supportive of the idea of university status. University status ought to come as a consequence of the merger and not be a premise for it. Operationalisation was important, as university status was conditioned by a set of factors.

So far I have identified two main discourses operating in the merger process: the support discourse that supports the idea of becoming a university, and the opposition discourse where this idea is not supported. In addition we can separate the support discourse into two analytically distinct parts. The first is university status as a premise for the merger and the second is university status as a consequence of the merger. If we return to my proposal that the idea takes precedence over the operationalisation of the idea as long as the idea
is supported and the operationalisation of the idea does not lead to a disadvantageous power position, we see that the idea is supported regardless of whether it is seen as a premise or a consequence. What differs, however, is the focus on operationalisation. When the idea of university status is seen as a consequence, operationalisation plays a bigger part.

In this act we have also witnessed how the due diligence enabled different discursive practices. The construction of meaning by the administration at Østfold that Vestfold was in a strained financial position, conditioned a discourse where the idea of becoming a university was linked to economy. This portrayed Buskerud and Vestfold as wanting to merge with Østfold to get access to their money so they could use it to fund their PhD programmes. This worldview was contested by a discourse where Østfold was described as having done an incorrect analysis of Vestfold’s financial status. They were not in a bad financial position at all. The argument of inaccurate analysis was combined with the argument that Østfold’s surplus was in violation with higher education practice. The construction of meaning in this case was that it was in fact Østfold that had done something wrong in not using their entire budget. This worldview was confirmed by the Ministry of Education. The consequence of the due diligence was an increased antagonism between Østfold on one side and the other two on the other. What further contributed to this antagonism was the development of PhD educations. The question of who owned them, whether they should be reset at the start of the merger process, and whether PhD programmes strengthen or weaken lower level education enabled binary discourses used to construct both support and opposition.

At this stage in the merger process an inwards perspective starts to manifest itself at Østfold. The due diligence is an example of how resource allocation, competition, positioning and marginalisation between the merger partners challenged the outwards perspective based on a discourse of education market. Another example is the development of PhD programmes. By the end of this act, the climate between the merger partners was lukewarm. What were initially discursive practices of support and opposition permeating all three merger partners, increasingly became a polarisation of discursive practices. The support discourse was dominant at Buskerud and Vestfold, and the opposition discourse was dominant at Østfold. What we will see in the fourth and final act is that Buskerud and Vestfold express concern about the willingness of Østfold to enter into a merger. We will also see, from the final
report written by the three rectors and from the consultative statements, that the construction of support focusing on the idea of becoming a university is challenged by the construction of opposition focusing on the operationalisation of that idea.
Chapter 9 – Act four: Termination (January 2012 – March 2012)

In this act I focus on the last months of the merger process. Constructions of support and opposition have characterised the process from the outset but it is at this point the antagonism between the two leads to the termination of the merger process. This act starts with the note of concern sent by Buskerud and Vestfold. I then discuss the final report and following consultative statements. After that I discuss operationalisation in terms of resource allocation. This discussion is closely linked to previous discussions of the idea to become a university and the development of PhD programmes. I end the act with a brief overview of what happened after the merger was called off.

The note of concern (January 2012)

Why is a single letter important in a merger that involved hundreds of pages from reports, consultative statements and other documents? The answer is what the letter represented and the questions asked in the letter. As we have seen in the previous acts, the climate between the merger partners was not very good at this point. This is actually not precise. It would be more correct to say that there were contradicting worldviews represented through discursive practices used by specific individuals at the three university colleges. The most obvious example of this was the antagonism at Østfold between the Rector and a few others on the one hand and the majority of administrative and academic staff on the other. The Rector continued to make use of discursive practices of support while the dominant discourse at Østfold became one of opposition.

The note of concern was sent to the Rector at Østfold 11 January 2012. It was signed by the chair of the board and the Rector at Buskerud, and by the Rector at Vestfold (who also functions as the chair of the board). The background for the letter was a meeting between the mentioned people and leaders from Østfold. Here Buskerud and Vestfold explained that they were under the impression that strong forces at Østfold wanted to withdraw from the project before the formal decision regarding a merger was to be made by the boards. After consulting the Rector and the University College Director at Østfold, the rectors and boards of Buskerud and Vestfold decided to send a formal letter of concern to the board at Østfold. In the letter they asked the board at Østfold to clarify Østfold’s position; if they still intended to bring the project to a conclusion, or if the resistance in the organisation would enforce other decisions. The board at Østfold responded to the letter 16 January 2012. They
wrote that the board at Østfold had every intention to bring the merger process to a conclusion. However, they pointed out three aspects they were concerned about: firstly, the ownership of future PhD programmes, secondly, the reduction of professional involvement, and thirdly, financial framework conditions. The first of these three issues were discussed in Chapter 8. It can be related to who was to hold ownership, and as such power, over the PhD programmes based on where faculty management was to be located. The second issue can be related to discursive practices of opposition, which became increasingly stronger in late 2011 and early 2012. The third issue can be related to the due diligence that I discussed in chapter 8, and resource allocation, which I discuss later in this chapter. All of these issues focused on operationalisation.

What Buskerud and Vestfold focused on in their note of concern, was increased resistance at Østfold to the very “foundation” of the merger. It was not explicitly stated what this foundation was, but from the context it could be interpreted as the university ambition. It was the very idea of the merger Buskerud and Vestfold worried that Østfold did not share. The note of concern is therefore a very good example of how the dominant discourse of support at Buskerud and Vestfold was based on the concept of idea. In the reply from Østfold however, the focus was on operationalisation. As I described above, three very concrete issues were raised in the reply that needed to be addressed in order to get the merger process back on track. In the reply focus was on operationalisation, which was also the basis for the opposition discourse.

**Report – The organisation of a merged university college (February 2012)**

The intention of the final report was to provide a foundation on which a decision to merge or not could be made. It was written by the three rectors and sent out on consultation 15 February 2012. The report was called “The organisation of a merged university college”. Deadline for consultative statements was set to 5 March 2012. The report started with a short introduction describing the background for the report and the merger process so far. After the introduction, the reasons for merger were described. These reasons were based on the Stjernø commission’s report “A comprehensive view” that concluded that Norwegian higher education was no longer sustainable (NOU 2008:3, 2008). The existing structure was challenged through intensified international competition, higher demands for qualifications, a university race between small institutions, demographic
changes and a financing system that did not encourage cooperation. Using the Stjernø commission’s report to legitimise the merger indicates how influenced the final report was by discourses of education market and academic drift. This is nothing new; as we have learned from the previous acts, all reports produced during the merger process had taken that perspective.

It was stated in the rector’s report “The organisation of a merged university college” that different models of cooperation had proven vulnerable and unstable over time, and it was considered that challenges could best be met, and opportunities realised by joining forces in a new institution. Three types of challenges were described; strategic, academic and administrative. Strategic challenges were based on the notion of the “restructuring” of higher education. In order to be competitive and increase quality, change was needed. Competition was described as consisting of two elements. Firstly, competition as something existing both nationally and internationally between university colleges and universities, as a result of globalisation. Secondly, competition is about resources like students, staff and research funding. Strategic challenges are seen as a consequence of the restructuring of the higher education market in the world. This “area” of competition displays the outwards perspective taken in the report. What we will see in the consultative statements is that this outwards perspective is challenged by the inwards perspective used in the construction of opposition.

In the rectors’ report, academic challenges were centred around quality. Through a merger, higher quality demands on lectures and research could be met. The challenge was to secure the highest possible competence. The argument was that the average age among academic personnel is high, and there would be a competition in the future for the most qualified candidates. The academic challenge, then, is to get hold of those candidates. This argument is consistent with the discourse of academic drift. The policy of hiring only people with PhDs reproduces and further confirms the ideology of a knowledge-based society that rates research higher than education.

The administrative challenge was described as being able to meet ever increasing complexity in administration. The introduction of new administrative systems, new reporting requirements, changes in procedures, development of quality education, more outreaching public relations, and expectations of increased external income were described as some of the
conditions that require great administrative expertise. It was argued that all these challenges were best met with a merger between the three university colleges. These arguments are based on ideologies of economy of scale and are as such connected to a market discourse.

We have already established the fact that in the construction of support, university ambition was the idea that drove the merger. In the report the university ambition was presented as:

The university college should have the ambition to develop the institution into a vocational oriented university. The goal is not the university title itself, but academic development in order to meet the expectations of students, the social demands, and the needs of society (p. 5).

The reason for the ambition to become a university was based on two arguments that followed immediately after the ambition of university status was presented. The first argument was that a university ambition would signal ambitions of quality. The other argument was that a university ambition would help strengthen undergraduate education. It was further argued that university status would secure a national and international competitive advantage with respect to the recruitment of students at all levels and the recruitment of academic staff as well as administrative staff.

The outwards perspective was very visible in the report. It is based on a market discourse that includes concepts like “competition”, “expertise”, “change”, “quality” and “sustainable”. The basic logic is that change is coming, and in order to be sustainable and competitive one needs to secure quality by attracting expertise. The outwards perspective is something I discussed in Act one. While the first part of the report presented the background and arguments for a merger, the next sections described visions and goals for the project. Then the name of the merged organisations was presented: it was to be named “Viken University College”. Viken means “the bay” in English and it refers to the geographical location of the three university colleges involved in the merger process. The counties of Buskerud, Vestfold and Østfold are all situated around the “bay” of the Oslofjord. In the next section management and leader structure was described. The question whether there should be an appointed or elected rector was discussed. Buskerud and Østfold suggested an appointed rector while Vestfold wanted the rector to be elected. On the basis of
the disagreement between the three boards, the three rectors suggested a scheme for the first period of an appointed rector and a unified management, but also advised that the rector should be recruited through a selection process before appointment. This model was called an “advisory electoral system”, and functioned as a compromise between an appointed and elected rector. It was also recommended that Rector and her/his staff should be geographically located at Vestfold. The rectors recommended three pro-rectors, and the pro-rector located at Østfold should be responsible for education and internationalisation, the pro-rector located at Buskerud should be responsible for research, and the pro-rector located at Vestfold should be responsible for external interaction. The rectors recommend that the pro-rector at Østfold functioned as vice-rector.

The part concerning academic organisation was one of the most debated issues so far in the merger process. The question of where faculty management was going to be located was based on the development of PhD programmes. There were two alternatives presented in the report. Alternative one outlined an organisational structure that consisted of more than the four faculties that were proposed in the workgroup report of academic organisation. The reason for this was threefold. Firstly, there should be a geographical balance within the merged university college. Secondly, faculty structure should display academic major areas within the institution’s main profile, which, among other things, should be an ambition to develop PhD programmes. Thirdly, faculty structure would lend a specific character to the institution. Alternative one implied that the basic units should be organised into seven faculties in the following way:

1. Faculty of Health and Social Studies. Faculty management to be located at Campus Drammen (Buskerud).
2. Faculty of Business and Social Science. Faculty management to be located at Campus Hønefoss (Buskerud).
3. Faculty of Humanities. Faculty management to be located at Campus Halden (Østfold).
4. Faculty of Information Technology. Faculty management to be located at Campus Halden (Østfold).
5. The Norwegian Theatre Academy. Faculty management to be located at Campus Fredrikstad (Østfold).
6. Faculty of Education. Faculty management to be located at Campus Bakkenteigen (Vestfold).
7. Faculty of Technology and Maritime Science. Faculty management to be located at Campus Bakkenteigen (Vestfold).

The second alternative recommended that the basic units should be organised into four faculties. The reason for this was firstly that teacher training should be organised in one faculty instead of separated in a faculty of humanities and a faculty of education, and secondly that the geographical balance should be maintained by placing the three major academic faculties of Health and Social Studies, Technology, and Education in separate counties. It provided the following model:

1. Faculty of Health and Social Studies. Faculty management to be located at Campus Drammen (Buskerud).
2. Faculty of Business and Social Science. Faculty management to be located at Campus Hønefoss (Buskerud).
3. Faculty of Humanities and Education. Faculty management to be located at Campus Halden (Østfold).
4. Faculty of Technology and Maritime Science. Faculty management to be located at Campus Bakkenteigen (Vestfold).

In this model it had to be considered whether the Theatre Academy, presently located at Campus Fredrikstad (Østfold), should be added to the Faculty of Humanities and Education or organised as a separate faculty as presented in alternative one. It was stated that each faculty should, through academic priorities help to develop the institution in line with the institution’s overall goals and strategies. And that faculty division should reflect the merged university college's main focus areas. What was meant by “main focus areas” was not further specified, but one interpretation could be PhD programmes. The Faculty of Health and Social Studies in Drammen had a PhD programme under development. That was also the case for the Faculty of Business and Social Science in Hønefoss. The Faculty of Technology and Maritime Science at Bakkenteigen already had a PhD programme in operation. However, the second PhD programme at Vestfold was being developed at the Faculty of Education.

The second model meant that faculty management would be located where there was no PhD programme, something that did not go down well at Vestfold. This structure did not follow the line of arguments presented in the construction of support where faculty managements should be located at the
strongest academic milieus, and that was understood to be where the PhD programmes were located. Locating the Faculty of Humanities and Education at Østfold was at odds with this line of argument. The Faculty of Education at Vestfold would never accept this structure. The result of choosing this structure would shift focus from idea to operationalisation and lead to a change from support to opposition at the Faculty of Education at Vestfold:

The Faculty of Education would not buy the idea [of structural organisation], either one or the other of the two proposals. They wanted control of it [the Faculty of Education] [...] The foundation was so weak that the moment someone felt that management was to be located in the wrong place they were against it [the merger].

(Member of the board, Vestfold University College)

The discursive practice of supporting the merger was changed to opposition as a consequence of how the idea was operationalised. At the same time support changed into opposition at Østfold based on the same discursive practice as in Vestfold. Even when the idea of becoming a university was supported, the operationalisation of allocating faculty management led to a change from support to opposition. In the construction of opposition at Østfold it was argued that they were marginalised if no faculty management was to be located in Østfold. When the position taken by the Faculty of Education at Vestfold became known, it confirmed the suspicion that Vestfold and Buskerud only wanted to merge with Østfold to get their hands on Østfold’s money. This also indicates how construction of support and opposition varies between organisational levels within a single university college. While Rector and top-level management at Vestfold supported the merger and focused on the idea, on the faculty level there was opposition if the operationalisation would lead to the loss of faculty management.

The development and establishment of a research education was described as a long-term process that required strategic foundation, building the necessary expertise, and infrastructure. In the report it was pointed out that Buskerud and Vestfold had worked “for years” to build up top expertise in some subject areas that for years had been the strategic focus areas of these university colleges: Micro and nano-systems technology (Vestfold, from about year 2000), text research and learning resources (Vestfold, from the mid-1990s), clinical health (Buskerud, from the 1990s) and business (Buskerud, from the 1980s). The result was that within these disciplines one PhD programme and
several master's programmes had been established, and in the three fields where so far no PhD programme had been established, two accreditation applications were under consideration by the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education, while they were still working with completing the accreditation application for the third PhD (business administration).

In this part of the report it was underlined that the existing PhD programme and the three programmes under development had a long history. As I discussed in the previous act, by explicitly stating when the development started they achieved two things. Firstly, it legitimised the three areas as priority areas that had already received substantial investments. Secondly, all talk of stopping development when the merger process started was seen as irrelevant. The development of PhD programmes had a much longer history than the merger process.

In the report there was talk about commitment. Commitment in this context meant to be true to the idea of why merge. Another use of commitment was in the context of developing PhD programmes. As long as there was no merger decision or even merger negotiation there was no need to be committed to the merger in the sense of giving up the development of PhD programmes. In the construction of support, commitment meant committing to the idea of the merger. At the same time there were no expectations of commitment to the operationalisation of the merger. It was seen as natural and as common sense to develop one's own PhD programmes without considering other merger partners, the explanation being that there were merger investigations only, nothing more. It was argued in the report that the academic centres of gravity, the strong academic communities, and the master's degrees and PhD programmes (accredited or planned), which Buskerud and Vestfold brought into the merged university college, were those institutions' dowry. It was also argued that Østfold would bring as its dowry its vast professional resources, which among other things had resulted in the establishment of several master's degrees in recent years.

One of the things in the final report that had not been discussed earlier in the process was that the merger would benefit from economies of scale. On the contrary, it had earlier been emphasised that saving money as a merger result was not an issue. The sudden argument of cost reduction provoked the opposition even more.
By the time the three rectors presented the final report the discourse of opposition had become dominant at Østfold. The whole merger process was questioned. The note of concern had been sent from Buskerud and Vestfold to Østfold, and Østfold had replied. Faith in the project was low. One perspective was that the final report was merely a controlled liquidation of the merger. Another perspective was that it, for the first time in the process, showed something concrete.

**Consultative statements (Buskerud)**

A total of 26 consultative statements were received from faculties, administrative units, the trade unions and the student organisation, including six consultative statements from external entities. The consultative statements supported the merger. The ambition to become a university was also supported. The importance of all three merger partners sharing this ambition was pointed out in some of the consultative statements as crucial. Being a university was described as important because it would increase autonomy and competitive advantage in an education market.

In the report two alternative academic structures had been suggested. The first involved a structure of seven faculties, while the other proposed four. Almost all consultative statements supported the second alternative with four faculties. Faculty management was suggested located to the “heaviest” academic milieus, which in practice meant where there were PhDs established or under development. This led to a suggestion that the Faculty of Education could just as well be located at Vestfold instead of at Østfold. The argument used was to secure momentum in developing the PhD programme there. This argument is an admittance of the close relationship between faculty management and PhD programmes. When the metaphor “heavy” is used it presupposes a specific kind of measurement. In this case weight is measured as either having a PhD programme or having one under development. Other units of measurement such as number of staff or students, research production, width of programme portfolio, number of master’s programmes etc., were not considered.

After justifying that faculty management should be located with the PhD programmes, further justification was given by referring to the university ambition. In order to achieve university status it was important to get the four
PhD programmes into operation. To secure that momentum was not lost in this development, faculty management should be located where the PhDs were developed. This means the idea took precedence over the operationalisation, because it was more important to secure the continuous development of PhDs in order to reach university status than to take the various individual interests into consideration. The discourse is also based on an outwards perspective were the point of departure is the merged university college.

The merger idea of achieving university status was supported in the consultative statements. However, the operationalisation of resource allocation was not totally accepted. The Faculty of Technology located in Kongsberg argued that since no faculty management was to be located at campus Kongsberg, the rector with the main administration should be located there. This argument is at odds with the previous line of arguments. In this case operationalisation takes precedence over the idea. It becomes an argument of balance. The reason why the rector and rector’s administration should be located at Kongsberg was simply because otherwise Kongsberg would get nothing: no faculty management and no rector. With six campuses in total, three in Buskerud, two in Østfold and one in Vestfold, the suggested structure of four faculties and one rector administration would mean that one campus would be left with nothing. This would be the case no matter how these units were allocated; the situation was exactly the same for Campus Fredrikstad in Østfold.

The Faculty of Business and Social Science pointed out that it was important that a merged university college did not draw resources from academic activities by introducing new levels of management, increased bureaucracy and larger transaction costs. That would hinder the ambition of becoming a university. If increased administrative costs decreased the development of PhDs they would directly interfere with the idea of achieving university status. Fear of increased administrative costs was an issue in all the university colleges, but in the dominant opposition discourse at Østfold cost was primarily linked to the development of PhDs: the cost of developing PhDs would affect undergraduate study programmes. Allocation of limited resources was an issue in both the construction of support and opposition. What differed was the understanding of core activity. In the construction of support increased administrative costs could jeopardise the development of PhD programmes. This would have direct consequences for the ambition to become
a university. In the construction of opposition the development of PhD programmes could jeopardise the quality of bachelor’s programmes.

The Faculty of Health Science supported the university ambition. The primary reason for this was firstly that future students expect the possibility to take all three levels of higher education, and secondly, that as a university the bachelor level would be strengthened. They also said that all three merger partners needed to share the ambition to become a university. University status was seen as the merger driver. The importance of shared goals to have a successful merger was underlined in several of the consultative statements. In the consultative statements from Buskerud the shared goal was explicitly stated as the goal of becoming a university.

The Faculty of Education supported an academic organisation with four faculties. They also supported the suggested distribution of faculty management. However, they were open to locating faculty management for the Faculty of Education to Vestfold. This would mean that Østfold would not hold faculty management for any faculty. They were also very clear on the university ambition, stating that it was a premise for the institutions entering the merger to have a clear ambition to achieve university status.

A recurrent topic in the consultative statements was the necessity to be robust in order to be competitive for students, staff and research funding. This discursive practice is based on an outwards perspective of a market. The education market was presented as a global market where an international perspective was self-evident. Another recurrent topic was the importance of all three merger partners sharing the ambition of becoming a university, representing a modern perspective. Østfold, who did not have university status as a strategic objective in their strategic plan and where university status was rejected by many employees, were nevertheless expected to adopt university status as a main ambition. Several of the consultative statements commented on the intended reduction of administrative costs. Not surprisingly, these comments came from administrative units. These comments focused on two things. Firstly, economy of scale was never an intended goal of the merger, and introducing it for the first time in the last report was seen as provocative. Secondly, economy of scale was seen as unrealistic.
Consultative statements (Vestfold)

A total of 20 consultative statements were received from faculties, administrative units, unions and the student organisation, including five consultative statements from external units. In general the consultative statements were positive to a merger but stressed that it conditioned that all three merger partners shared the same vision. Several of the consultative statements commented that this was not the case. There was explicit and implicit doubt that Østfold was a suitable merger partner.

Three of the four faculties supported the suggested structure of four faculties while the fourth did not comment on that. The Faculty of Humanities and Education and the Human Resource Division argued that faculty management for the Faculty of Humanities and Education should be located at Vestfold instead of Østfold.

Several of the administrative units were critical towards the idea of economy of scale. The signal that administrative costs could be reduced in a time where administrative costs were likely to increase would not make administrative staff positive to the merger.

The Faculty of Humanities and Education supported the merger and the ambition to become a university. However, they were quite sceptical to the suggested location of faculty management for the Faculty of Humanities and Education to Østfold. They argued they should hold the management for this faculty. They based this on the fact that they were in a process of developing a PhD programme and therefore should hold a strong position in the merged university college. Formal competence, research activity and study programmes offered within all three cycles were arguments used to argue that faculty management should be located at Vestfold.

The Faculty of Business and Social Science was very clear that they supported a merger where the explicit goal was to become a university. They said the report did not express that objective clearly enough. University ambition should be the starting point for every argument in the merger process according to this faculty.

The main message in the consultative statements was that there was support for the merger and for the university ambition, but this support was
conditioned by all three merger partners sharing this vision. The message was “we want this, but if you do not want it we should not do it”. It was an acceptance of dividing interests. The support for university status was based on a worldview that larger institutions are more robust and as such more competitive for resources like students, staff, and research funding. Size was equalled with robust, and as a consequence of that – quality. Size was also equalled with competitiveness. The scepticism towards Østfold was based on the difference in ambitions. Østfold did not share the ambition to become a university. The focal point in the consultative statements was on the idea. It was also conditioned by an education market discourse. When concern was expressed whether they wanted to merge with Østfold or not, it was because they did not see Østfold as strengthening their competitive position. Østfold was described as a hindrance to achieving the strategic objective to become a university. The discursive practice took its starting point in the idea and then developed from there.

In the consultative statement from the student organisation there was an impression that from their perspective the majority of students and staff at Østfold opposed the merger. They warned against a “forced marriage” and the difficulties such a merger would create. There was also a clear understanding of necessity. It was necessary to merge in order to meet challenges in the higher education sector, and avoid the risk of ending up as an “average university college, mass-producing bachelor’s degree candidates”.

**Consultative statements (Østfold)**

A total of 41 consultative statements were received from faculties, administrative units, trade unions and the student organisation, including 14 consultative statements from external units. In the internal consultative statements the main message was to say no to merger and yes to cooperation. All faculties and seven out of nine administrative units said no to the merger. The two administrative units that did not explicitly reject the merger refrained from giving an explicit recommendation. Of all the internal consultative statements that gave a concrete recommendation, none recommended merger. Many of the consultative statements recommended cooperation within the Oslofjord Alliance and with other partners in Norway and Sweden.

Of the 14 external consultative statements 11 recommended not to merge, one was positive, and two did not make any explicit recommendation. The reasons
given in the external consultative statements not to merge varied. Some pointed out that Østfold is a county with a relatively low education level. The need for bachelor’s and master’s programmes is therefore greater than for PhD programmes. There was a fear that a university ambition with the development of PhD programmes would weaken bachelor’s and master’s programmes. Other arguments were related to the fear of being marginalised and controlled by Buskerud and Vestfold.

Many of the internal consultative statements commented on the difference in ambition of becoming a university, whether one should have that as an objective at all or not, and if so, how soon the merged university college could achieve university status. The development of doctoral programmes was described as demanding and would require a redistribution of resources from bachelor’s and master’s programmes in favour of PhD programmes. Some pointed out that Østfold had assumed the premise that the development of PhDs would be a joint venture between the three merger partners while Buskerud and Vestfold had disregarded that and continued the development of their own PhDs. This was seen as a violation of the premise that the development of PhD programmes would be a joint venture between the three university colleges. The development of PhDs was regarded to be outside Østfold’s primary area of interest and would not benefit the county of Østfold. In addition, resources would be reallocated from campuses in Østfold, which over time would weaken the study programmes and Østfold as a region. This construction of meaning is based on an inwards perspective of competition between the merger partners.

Several of the consultative statements pointed out that the economic aspect should have been clarified. There was no analysis or assessment of short or long-term financial issues. This brought in a large amount of insecurity regarding the merger’s financial situation. It was commented that reducing administrative costs was not in accordance with academic ambitions, ambitions of increasing the number of students, and the complexity of the merged university college. If anything, administrative costs were more likely to increase than decrease.

Most consultative statements regarded an academic structure with four faculties as a better alternative than the alternative with seven faculties. However, it was questioned whether Vestfold would accept that the Faculty of
Humanities and Education would be located in Østfold. Some also thought it was unacceptable that the Faculty of Health and Social Science was located to Buskerud instead of Østfold. They pointed out that Østfold had the largest student base and the largest number of study programmes. Several pointed out that the management of at least one large faculty needed to be located to Østfold in order for them to accept a merger.

It was a common theme in most consultative statements that the suggested structure of allocation of faculty management, PhD programmes, rector with main administration, and administrative organisation would create a geographical and power-related unbalance. This created a fear that academic development and resources would be withdrawn from the county. Many said Østfold would fulfil its social mandate better as an independent higher education institution. The education level in Østfold is quite low and the region is primarily in need of bachelor’s and some master’s programmes. Being a university was seen more as a disadvantage than an advantage when focus was regional rather than global. The rejection of merging with Buskerud and Vestfold was not a rejection of continuous cooperation within the Oslofjord Alliance. Other higher education institutions were also given as examples that suited Østfold better than Buskerud and Vestfold. The Norwegian University of Life Sciences, which is the fourth partner in the alliance, was the primary example. A merger with them was described as more suitable given its geographical proximity to the two campuses in Østfold, and complementarity of offered study programmes. A merger with them was described as both a wanted and a realistic merger. However, this was heavily disputed by Buskerud and Vestfold. An overall tendency in the consultative statements was the focus on operationalisation. Even faculties and administrative units that previously supported the merger now opposed it.

The Faculty of Health and Social Studies pointed out that early in the process they were positive to a merger. This gradually changed as the process went on and the suggested organisational structure became clearer. They said in the beginning the process was open, but along the way the process became more closed. They also said that the three university colleges entered the merger process on different premises. Buskerud and Vestfold had a clear university ambition, while Østfold had acted on the premise that PhD programmes would be developed with all three university colleges involved in the development. They referred to the report “A comprehensive view II”, stating that early in the
process strategic choices should be made in relation to which areas one wished to prioritise in relation to PhD programmes and costs related to the realisation of these. This was understood as having a mutual strategy shared by all three university colleges on what and how PhD programmes would be developed. However, Buskerud and Vestfold continued the development of their PhDs, based on their strategies. As a consequence the PhDs under development did not cover Østfold’s interests, and in addition, over time resources would be drawn from Østfold to finance the PhDs at Buskerud and Vestfold. The faculty also commented on the location of faculty management. The Faculty of Health and Social Studies at Østfold was the largest of the three health faculties, both in terms of student numbers and numbers of study programmes. It had twice the number of students compared with Vestfold and almost one third more than Buskerud. It also had twice the number of study programmes compared with the health faculties at Buskerud and Vestfold. They made a point out of this, arguing that even though they were the largest, still faculty management would not be located at Østfold. Developing PhDs were not seen as something that would strengthen bachelor’s and master’s programmes. On the contrary, it would weaken these programmes as a result of resources being reallocated to fund the PhDs. The faculty also commented on the suggested location of rector and rector’s administration to Vestfold. This would contribute to even more imbalance between the three merger partners. These arguments made by the Faculty of Health and Social Studies illustrate how operationalisation took precedence over the idea. It did not matter if the idea was supported or not; the consequence of being placed in a disadvantageous power position generated opposition.

**Resource allocation**

We have now seen how the construction of meaning differed in the consultative statements. Consultative statements from Buskerud and Vestfold represented an outwards perspective where the idea of university status enabled a discourse of support. Consultative statements from Østfold represented an inwards perspective where the operationalisation of resource allocation enabled a discourse of opposition. I have already discussed the idea and it is now time to take a closer look at the operationalisation in the form of resource allocation.

In a way it was not the division of faculties per se that was the problem. It was the allocation of faculty management:
Both Vestfold and Buskerud who had worked with PhDs felt it was natural that where the PhDs were developed faculty management should also be located. And had we used that model, no faculty management would have been located in Østfold. So faculty location was more difficult than the division of faculties.

(Chair of the board, Buskerud University College)

The reason why faculty location was more difficult than the division of faculties was that the division of faculties in itself did not affect power distribution. It was not until faculties with their faculty heads were being geographically located to specific campuses that problems arose. The reason was that holding faculty management was construed the same as holding power. If Østfold were left out in the allocation of faculty management they would be marginalised in the merged university college. When Buskerud and Vestfold felt it was natural to locate faculty management to where the PhDs had been developed it can be construed as a construction of meaning based on an outwards perspective where the PhDs belong to the whole university college. However, when the Faculty of Education at Vestfold realised they might not get faculty management, their focus immediately changed to operationalisation. This is because holding faculty management was seen as equivalent to holding power. This is in line with my proposition that an idea is only supported as long as it does not lead to a disadvantageous power position.

Faculty management was not the only aspect of resource allocation. It also included division of financial resources and whether one should develop and operate PhD programmes or not. When a bank sponsored the development of a PhD programme in business at Campus Hønefoss (Buskerud) it was under the condition that the PhD programme would be located there. In the construction of opposition this was construed as strategic positioning based on regional interests. Operationalisation was therefore very tightly linked to power. I discussed that in chapter 8.

In addition it was also a question of existing resources and how they were to be allocated in the future. This was the focus of the due diligence that I also discussed in chapter 8. What all these aspects of resource allocation share is the focus on operationalisation. It was a question of how rather than a question of why. What is also a common feature concerning resource allocation is how it was used in the construction of opposition, and how
discursive practices of opposition focused on operationalisation. In other words, in the opposition discourse operationalisation took precedence over the idea.

**The last board meeting (March 2012)**

The merger attempt was terminated 13 March 2012 by the three rectors in the form of a press release. Formally, however, it was not up to the rectors to terminate the merger. That decision lay in the hands of the boards at the three university colleges. At Østfold’s last board meeting before the merger was terminated, the board members were all presented with a formulated decision made in advance. The board meeting was 29 March 2012 and the decision was formulated as follows:

> The merger process between the three university colleges is terminated due to substantial resistance from Østfold University College.

The boards at Buskerud and Vestfold accepted this proposed text. However, in the minutes from the board meeting at Østfold there is this extra remark to the text:

> The board was of the clear understanding that all three parties must take their share of the blame for the ‘merger project’ failure. On the basis of that board member Helge Ramsdal proposed the following change to the proposed resolution:

> ‘The merger process between the three university colleges is terminated’. This proposal was unanimously adopted.

At Østfold the board did not want to state that the merger termination was caused by substantial resistance from Østfold. They simply stated that the merger was terminated. There is no explanation of why the board wanted this change. However, the use of the phrase “substantial resistance” implies an amount of blame. The message conveyed was that it was Østfold’s fault that the merger was terminated. The reaction from the board can be construed as a defence mechanism to what was seen as an improper attribution of blame. It was the board that used the term “blame”. The response makes sense if resistance is seen as something dysfunctional or pathological. The tradition of organisational behaviour sees resistance from a social psychological perspective where resistance is a result of poor leadership. Resistance from
this perspective can and should be managed (Huzell, 2005). “Resisters” are defined as not understanding what the change is all about. If enough information had been provided and everyone understood the reason for change, then there would be no resistance.

Viewing resistance from this perspective could have provoked the board at Østfold to act as they did. In their own eyes, they had done nothing wrong. In the initial phase of the merger process it was stated that any party could withdraw from the process if they felt the merger would not benefit their university college. This was confirmed by the rector at Buskerud and noted in the report “Østfold University College’s institutional cooperation – investigation of alternatives to merging with Buskerud University College and Vestfold University College”. From the board’s perspective they did nothing more than follow the agreed terms of the merger. The understanding of the merger process, which I discussed in chapter 6, can explain why the board at Østfold changed the text. If the understanding was that the decision to merge would be made after the final report, resistance would not be a relevant issue. The outcome of the merger process was merely one of two possible results. In this construction of meaning, operationalisation takes primacy over the idea, as the outcome of the process was a result of weighing pros and cons. On the other hand, in the construction of support, which focused on the idea, resistance could be linked to the intention of the merger.

Epilogue

What happened after the decision was made? Buskerud and Vestfold continued the merger process and merged into Buskerud and Vestfold University College (HBV) 1 January 2014. They are still pursuing the ambition to become a university and are going to merge with Telemark University College 1 January 2016. Østfold University College developed a new strategic plan in 2014 where they clearly stated that they were to continue as an independent university college with no intention to merge with other higher education institutions. At the time of writing, this strategy still works, as there has been no initiative from the Ministry of Education to force Østfold to merge with another higher education institution. However, the Ministry of Education has stated that the restructuring of the Norwegian higher education sector is not yet completed. Østfold University College is by no means exempt from this restructuring process and time will tell whether the strategy to continue as an independent university college is successful.
Summary

We have now come to the end of the merger process. The fourth and final act started with the note of concern where Buskerud and Vestfold were concerned whether Østfold was still committed to the process. This note confirmed the growing antagonism between the merger partners. Although the board at Østfold responded to the letter with a statement of commitment, the final report and the following consultative statements revealed how constructions of support and opposition conditioned the merger to be terminated. At this stage, the focus on operationalisation in the form of resource allocation took precedence over the idea of becoming a university.

So far in this thesis I have placed the events in a timeline and linked discursive practices to events. This is a way of structuring the process as if it was a linear development of discourses. Although this is a good way of discussing how change from support to opposition can be explained through discursive practices, it is still a simplification of the complex web of discourses that were in play. I have tried to untangle this web by using conceptual pairs of support/opposition, idea/operationalisation, outwards/inwards and modern/traditional. In the third and final part of this thesis I use the conceptual pairs to discuss the construction of support and opposition.
PART THREE – THE CONSTRUCTION OF SUPPORT AND OPPOSITION

In this third and final part I leave the sequential way of presenting the merger process based on a timeline. Instead I focus on the four conceptual pairs of support/opposition, idea/operationalisation outwards/inwards and modern/traditional independent from the timeline in chapter 10. I also bring in some concluding remarks of what my contribution to research has been through this study.
Chapter 10 – Support and opposition

Discourses of support and opposition shaped social structures and conditioned the construction of worldviews of those involved in the merger process. At the same time the discourses were shaped by existing discursive and non-discursive elements. The strategic plan to become a university was originally created discursively in 2005-2006 at Buskerud and Vestfold. In the merger process it had become totally internalised and operated as a non-discursive element shaping discursive practices. The development of PhD programmes as a means to achieve the goal to become a university also shaped the discursive practice. In the construction of support this led to an allocation discourse where faculty managements were to be located at the location of PhD programmes. This was perceived as natural and common sense because faculty management should be located in the best academic milieus, and that was where the PhD programmes were located. Any discussion of power relations and balance between the partners was subordinate due to the fact that competition and marginalisation was related to the external environment. Merger opposition was seen as dysfunctional because the discourse it was based on did not coincide with the overall rationale for the merger initiative.

In the opposition discourse, in the end holding the hegemony at Østfold, the university ambition was not a given. As a consequence the development of PhD programmes was not seen as something necessary in order to reach an overarching goal but rather as a means for Buskerud and Vestfold to position themselves in the merger process. What was perceived as natural and common sense was that faculty management, and in effect power, was to be distributed equally among the three merger partners. Competition was internal – between the university colleges and as a result of imbalanced distribution of power Østfold was marginalised. Merger opposition was seen as responsible behaviour in order to preserve autonomy. The lack of identification with the vision of the merged university college can explain the focus on outcome instead of process, because people who identify less with the organisation are more likely to be focused on the change outcomes then on the change process (van Knippenberg et al., 2006). The support discourse and the opposition discourse represented two significantly different constructions of reality. Fairclough (1992, p. 87) understands ideologies to be:

Significations/constructions of reality (the physical world, social relations, social identities), which are built into various dimensions of the forms/meanings of
discursive practices, and which contribute to the production, reproduction or transformation of relations of domination.

The ideology in the support discourse of university being the prime form of organisational structure shaped the discursive practice labelling other ideologies “opposition”. This was made possible due to the fact that the overall political view of higher education is in favour of mergers. This does not mean that there is a national political will to convert university colleges into universities. On the contrary, there are political signals indicating that although there is a political will for fewer and larger higher education institutions, there is no will to create additional universities. Taken the rationale to merge in order to become a university, this may appear as a contradiction.

The ideologies embedded in discursive practice are most effective when they become naturalised and achieve the status of “common sense” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 87). The shift at Østfold from supporting to opposing the merger can be explained from the perspective of common sense. The university ambition did not gain any momentum. The allocation of faculty management was seen as unfair resulting in an imbalance of power. The ideology prominent at Østfold as primarily a bachelor’s and master’s degree facility made it natural and common sense to oppose the merger. The question of, what’s in it for us, was answered by “nothing”. Why should we give up our autonomy and pay lots of money to reach a goal we don’t have? What was considered natural and common sense differed fundamentally between the two discourses of support and opposition. Common sense is something no one questions when it is once established, but what is perceived as common sense does not necessarily mean that things go well (Skorstad, 2011).

There was no consensus of what the intention of the pre-merger phase was about. In the support discourse the intention of the pre-merger phase was to establish the best way of organising the merged university college. In the opposition discourse the intention of the pre-merger phase was to reach a decision if one should merge or not. There is currently a political pressure on higher education in Norway to become more robust. Although there is no political will at the moment to force higher education institutions to merge, there are strong political signals encouraging universities and university colleges to merge. To say no to initiate a merger process would be to neglect political will. This might explain the construction of meaning in the support
discourse of understanding the merger process to be something done to find the best way of organising the merged university college, while in the construction of opposition it was insisted that the merger process was about finding out if the merger should be implemented or not. By holding on to this position political signals were not neglected, but at the same time there was no total surrender to the political will of merging.

Let us now return to the two stories I presented in the introduction and see if they make more sense. The first story was a story of opposition:

Why should we merge with them? They only want to merge with us to get their hands on our money to fund the development of their PhD programmes which they need to become a university. We don’t want to be a university. Our job is to educate students in our region so they can become nurses, teachers and engineers. We provide vocational educations on the bachelor level and some master’s programmes. That is what we do and that is what we’re supposed to do. PhD programmes will be funded on the expense of bachelor programmes and lower the quality of those programmes. And even if we wanted to merge the merger process showed that we became the losers. They got everything and we got nothing. We’re better off on our own.

What the story can tell us is that the construction of opposition was based on the three concepts of operationalisation, inwards perspective and traditional perspective. The concept of operationalisation is linked to resource allocation in relation to the development of PhD programmes. The concept of inwards perspective becomes apparent in the talk about “they got everything and we got nothing”, whereas the traditional perspective is linked to arguments that bachelor’s and master’s programmes are “what we do and what we’re supposed to do”. The idea of becoming a university is rejected, which makes operationalisation the base for the opposition discourse. Now, let us take a look at the second story, which was the story of support:

Why didn’t they want to merge with us? We want to become a strategically positioned university in tomorrow’s education market, competing for students, staff and research funding. If we’re going to survive we need to join forces. We have spent a lot of time and money developing PhD programmes they will get access to for free once we’ve merged. The PhD programmes will belong to the whole organisation. It’s not about who’s getting what, it’s about what we can do
together. Our job is to educate students in our region so they can become nurses, teachers and engineers. We need to provide the whole range of educational programmes from bachelor to doctor in order to meet student demands. That is what we do and that is what we’re supposed to do. PhD programmes will improve quality on all levels and strengthen the bachelor programmes. The merger is not about winners and losers. It’s about standing together in a globalised world where only the best survive. We’re better off together.

In this story the discourse position was based on the three concepts of idea, outwards perspective and modern perspective. The idea of becoming a university was construed as necessary to survive in an education market. The concept of outwards perspective is linked to the way competition is described as something between the merged university college and other higher education institutions. Therefore there are no “winners and losers” in this merger. The concept of modern perspective is linked to the claim that PhD programmes will strengthen lower level programmes.

In this study I have focused on the two discourse positions of support and opposition. A discourse position “describes the ideological position from which subjects, including individuals, groups and institutions, participate in and evaluate discourse” (Jäger & Maier, 2009, p. 49). I have linked the discourse position of support to the concepts of idea, outwards perspective and modern perspective. By doing this I argue that discursive practices conditioned by these concepts are ideologically driven and stand in a dialectical relationship to a counter discourse position of opposition linked to the concepts of operationalisation, inwards perspective and traditional perspective. If we go back to the three research questions I presented in the introduction chapter, it is now time to recapitulate what I have tried to do in this thesis. The research questions were:

1. *How can the merger process be described and explained from a support perspective?*
2. *How can the merger process be described and explained from an opposition perspective?*
3. *How can change from support to opposition be explained?*

The merger process from a support perspective can be described as driven by an idea. This idea was expressed through a wish to achieve university status. It
was also driven by the focus the discursive practices had in understanding the higher education sector as operating in a global education market. From a discourse position of support there was an outwards perspective construing the merged university college as the binary entity in relation to other higher education institutions. The idea of university status was also based on a modern perspective where universities hold higher status than university colleges in the higher education sector hierarchy.

The merger process from an opposition perspective was driven by operationalisation. Instead of focusing on the idea of becoming a university, focus was on an inwards perspective of competition between the merger partners. Discursive practices based on the ideology of a binary higher education sector in which universities and university colleges are equal but different were also used. Change from support to opposition can be explained as a result of a change from focus on idea to focus on operationalisation. This change in focus was a result of perceived power positions. In my conceptual framework I posited that the idea takes precedence over the operationalisation of the idea as long as the idea is supported and the operationalisation of the idea does not lead to a disadvantageous power position.

What I have tried to show in this thesis is that there is a mechanism operating in the relation between idea and operationalisation. This mechanism is socially constructed in discourse. However, it is opaque to those involved in the production, reproduction and transformation of discourse. It operates independently of the consciousness of actors involved in the construction of support and opposition. This is not meant in a deterministic way of looking at this mechanism, but rather that we are unaware of its influence on discourse. There is a link between idea and operationalisation conditioned by ideology and power relations that explain change from support to opposition.

**Concluding remarks**

In this thesis I set out to gain a better understanding of the pre-merger phase in a higher education merger. The merger process was terminated before a decision to merge was made. Hence my focus has been on meaning constructions of what happened in the process that can shed some light on its outcome. The study is about a merger attempt. At the same time it is about changes in the higher education sector. If I would dare to claim I have made any scientific contribution in this study I would like to start with my
contribution to the merger and acquisition literature. My focus has been on the pre-merger phase. This is a phase that is underrepresented in the merger and acquisition literature. By focusing on this phase I can bring to the literature some knowledge of that phase.

Although I have only studied one case I would argue that the idea of why a merger is initiated and the operationalisation of how the merger process is to be conducted and the new organisation constructed, are to be found in all merger processes. I have also contributed to new knowledge about attempted mergers. This is also a focus underrepresented in the literature. An attempt means that what you initially intended to do did not happen and therefore could be classified as uninteresting. But the merger process did happen regardless of the outcome and as such represents an important area of research. In my opinion the concepts of support/opposition and idea/operationalisation are not restricted to mergers in the higher education sector, but to all mergers. Whether this holds true is an empirical question well suited for further research.

In addition to my contribution to the merger and acquisition literature I would say I have made a contribution to research on the higher education sector. This sector is currently characterised by profound restructuring. Several merger initiatives have been made, with some leading to mergers and some not (Kyvik & Stensaker, 2013). These changes are to a large extent driven by ideologies of neoliberal thoughts and academic drift. My concepts of outwards/inwards related to a market discourse, and modern/traditional related to academic drift can be linked to a wider discussion of what we want our future universities and university colleges to be. Regardless of the outcome of this merger process it revealed some important issues that we need to address if we are not to succumb under the pressure from imported reforms fundamentally changing the Norwegian higher education sector. This perspective has not been the primary focus of my study, but nevertheless, I think it can be used as a point of departure for a wider discussion and further research.

Finally, I would suggest that this study can be relevant for practitioners involved in mergers. With a better understanding of the construction of support and opposition they can be critical to the notion that planning and execution of a merger is a straightforward process. Management oriented
“how-to” books should be approached with caution and “guides to good practice” (HEFCE, 2004) should not be read as a recipe for success.

Studying the construction of support and opposition in an attempted higher education merger has brought new insight into a contemporary phenomenon that in one way or another affects most of us. As students, teachers, researchers, parents, job seekers, politicians and so on we all have to deal with changes in the higher education sector.
References


Weinblatt, B. (2012). *An Examination of Academic Decision-making During Two University Mergers*. The University of Toledo, Theses and Dissertations. (Paper 466)


The Construction of Support and Opposition

This study focuses on support and opposition in an attempted merger between three Norwegian university colleges. It aims to describe and explain how discourses of support and opposition conditioned the outcome of the merger process.

The thesis is divided into three parts. In the first part the four conceptual pairs – support/opposition, idea/operationalisation, outwards/inwards and modern/traditional – used to analyse the merger process, are introduced, as well as the area of mergers in higher education and methodological aspects. The second part is constructed as a play with acts presenting the merger process in a chronological order. The third and final part focuses on general insights into the construction of support for and opposition to the merger.

The study shows how different discursive practices evolved into antagonism between the three university colleges leading to the termination of the merger process. Support for the idea of the merger as a means of achieving university status was not sufficient; the operationalisation of the merger process itself and the proposed construction of the merged organisation resulted in power struggles. In addition, support and opposition were conditioned by discourses of the education market and academic drift.