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# Mergers, distance, and leadership: Perceptions of different forms of distance to leadership in merger processes

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**Abstract**

Mergers in higher education are large-scale, complex organisational change processes seeking to integrate former independent institutions into a new organisational entity. Mergers are often justified by reference to broad overarching goals such as quality, relevance, and efficiency. In practice, mergers entail attempts at organisational integration which can be inhibited by several obstacles, increasing and large internal distances can be such a hindrance to integration. In this paper, we explore how different forms of distance to leadership in the context of higher education can be conceptualised, and how experiences of different forms of distance interrelate. This paper shows that geographical distance can also mask other conceptualisations of distances and that geographical distance can also interact with other forms of distances. The empirical basis consists of data from a large-scale research project addressing the organisational transformations taking place in Norwegian higher education due to mergers between 2016 and 2017.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions meet exceedingly higher expectations about delivering education, research and innovation for the society (Huisman & Stensaker, 2022; Välimaa, 2009) and are expected to do this in a more efficient manner, preferably with fewer resources. A more streamlined and managerial organisation is expected,

where more professionalised leadership is an important component (Krücken et al., 2013). These changes are of course not a case of a simple transformation and higher education shedding its old skin and adapting to a new form. These change processes are multidimensional (Seeber et al., 2015), contested (Whitley, 2008) and generally add to the existing complexity of higher education institutions. Further complexity arises from the fact that these change processes can be accompanied by other concurrent changes to strengthen quality, one example of this is the focus on mergers in higher education.

While some institutions have been designed as multi-campus institutions from the outset, mergers of existing institutions create a new dynamic. Coordination issues, asymmetries and geography are among several issues that create tensions for multi-campus institutions (Pinheiro et al., 2017). These tensions become particularly pertinent when multi-campus institutions across long geographical distances engage in attempts to create stronger organisational integration. Such a situation may amplify existing tensions, reconfigure some that emerge in a merger process, and potentially provide a basis for unresolvable issues in the organisation (Borlaug et al., 2023; Huisman et al., 2023). Exploring how distance is perceived and played out in the context of complex organisational change processes is vital to understanding the forces that may contribute to the integration of the new organisation and those that may inhibit it.

Earlier analyses of merger processes in Norwegian higher education have indicated challenges with leading across distances during and in the aftermath of merger processes. Issues that have been raised are the impressions among staff that leaders are too distant, and the new organisations are too large and spread out. The experience of 'distance to leadership' was viewed as an issue both on a practical and metaphorical level, indicating that when discussing distance there is more at play than mere physical distance, emphasising issues of increased size, complexity, and hierarchy, as well as different values about where the organisation should be heading (Elken et al., 2020). This seems to contrast with traditional views of leadership in higher education, where academic staff is usually portrayed as rather reluctant to be subject to leadership (i.e., the often used 'herding cats' metaphor) where leaders should preferably stay 'far enough.'

Our observed problematisation of leadership as being 'too distant' raises questions of what distance means and whether there are different forms of distance at play. In this paper, we take an exploratory approach and employ qualitative data from a large project on mergers in higher education to examine some of these dimensions in a more comprehensive manner. We are interested in how geographical distance can also function proxy for other conceptualisations of distances, and how geographical distance can influence other forms of distances. First, we develop a conceptualisation of distance to leadership in times of structural change in higher education institutions. Second, we employ this conceptualisation as a heuristic to explore staff's experiences with distance after a major merger process at six Norwegian higher education institutions.

## 2 | DIFFERENT FORMS OF DISTANCE TO LEADERSHIP IN ACADEMIC ORGANISATIONS

Leadership in higher education remains a debated issue, not least given the ongoing transformation and modernisation of higher education worldwide. It is also an area where various national characteristics and traditions play a role in terms of leadership roles. Leadership literature in higher education largely follows literature on general leadership in that there has been a gradual shift away from the 'heroic leader' image, which examines what traits leaders have and how they behave (see, e.g., House & Aditya, 1997 for a discussion), towards viewing leadership as situated and relational (Bolden et al., 2008).

Leadership in higher education is also often emphasised as important during merger processes. Yet, it would seem that most of these focus on leading the institution through the merger process (Harman & Harman, 2003) and the complexity of such processes, and less so on how mergers may impact leadership at institutions that have entered the phase beyond the immediate reorganisation process. The ongoing changes in higher education institutions, associated with New Public Management and managerialism, also challenge existing understanding of leadership. In the literature

on leadership in higher education, there is a persistent view of leadership in higher education having to cater to the specific characteristics of higher education institutions and that leadership that does not take these into account remains ineffective: "leadership that undermines collegiality, autonomy and the opportunity to participate in decisions, that creates a sense of unfairness, that is not proactive on the department's behalf, and so on, is likely to be ineffective because it damages the commitment of academics" (Bryman, 2007, p. 707). While many of the current change pressures on higher education could be seen as an aim to construct higher education as 'any other' organisation with lean efficient leadership and management, these insights would suggest that this can also have detrimental effects.

## 2.1 | Distance in studies of leadership

There are several forms of distance being discussed in existing research on leadership. One key theme concerns measuring quantitatively how different forms of distance to leadership influences staff's performance. This perspective is not directly relevant to our study, but the different conceptualisations of distance are interesting and relevant to our study of how distance is spelt out during merger processes. While the specific characteristics of leadership in higher education suggest that direct application of general leadership ideas should be done with caution, these conceptualisations provide a relevant point of departure for our study. There are several somewhat overlapping categorisations of distance, broadly distinguishing between physical, structural (or hierarchical), cultural and social distance (see, for example, Antonakis & Atwater, 2002). We briefly outline these dimensions of distance below.

During large scale mergers the physical distance between staff members and leaders may increase notably when the merging units are located at different geographical locations. From the literature on leadership and distance, one important finding is that physical distance between leadership and staff influences the relationship between staff and leadership in a negative way (Carsten et al., 2021; Howell et al., 2005; Humala, 2015; Neufeld et al., 2010). The main argument is that physical distance between staff and leadership can be intertwined with social and interactional distance. Thus, it is the combination of physical and other forms of distance that are seen as a hindrance to leadership in their attempts to connect with staff. Carsten et al. (2021, p. 2) argue that leadership and staff "need to be physically, socially, and interactionally close for leadership processes and outcomes to be effective". Similarly, Howell et al. (2005, p. 283) suggest that leaders at a distance "need to work harder at relating to their followers' needs and aspirations in order to have the same level of positive impact they would close up". When physical distances increase, this literature highlights that the relationship between staff and leadership should be strengthened by social means such as learning to know each other and by means of frequent communication (Neufeld et al., 2010, p. 241). Implications of physical distance between staff and leadership means that other forms of distance are also brought along. In other words, physical distance is not an isolated category. Instead, physical distance, lack of contact and communication all add to a more general impression of distance (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002). This essentially means that actual physical distance is not the same as perceived distance (Siebdrat et al., 2014). Small physical distances (e.g., different building in the same campus) can be perceived as large as being in an entirely different location/city.

During merger processes, the *structural distance*, i.e., the number of governance levels between staff and leadership, may increase. In the literature on distance to leadership, structural distance is operationalised in different ways, some definitions include physical distance in the conceptualisation of structural distance (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002), others focus more specifically on hierarchical levels of the organisation (Avolio et al., 2004). Like in conceptualisations of physical distance above, structural distance influences the relationship between staff and leadership in the sense that it impacts both how leadership communicate and the extent to which staff feel connected and committed to the (new) organisation. For example, Hill et al. (2012) examine the role of hierarchical distance at times of change in organisations. They explore how leadership communication shapes staff's commitment to organisational change and how this varies according to hierarchical distance. In this instance, larger hierarchical distance had a negative impact on staff's commitment to organisational change.

The impact on distance to leadership is created by increased hierarchy and number of governance levels, but it is the way these augmented governance levels represent a hindrance to communication and commitment that represent the problem of distance. An interesting observation is provided by Berson and Halevy (2014). They distinguish two distinct leadership behaviours: abstract behaviour as providing visions, and concrete behaviour as providing feedback, and find that hierarchical distance (e.g., number of governance levels) impacts these two differently and in the opposite manner. Staff respond positively to feedback from leadership being hierarchically close, and to visions articulated by leadership being hierarchically more distant. This means that structural distance conditions effective means of communication between leadership and staff. Increasing the number of hierarchical levels makes it more challenging for leadership to provide direct feedback. The other way around, when the number of governance levels increase, a more effective form of communication for leadership is to emphasise overall visions. This challenges assumptions of singular effective modes of communication from leadership to staff and emphasises the role of hierarchical distance as one potentially prominent expression of distance to leadership in academic organisations that are going through merger processes.

Several studies explore how *cultural distance*—e.g., differences in values and communication styles—between leadership and staff influences how effective leadership would be in communication with staff. Cultural distance refers to differences in values and communication styles that can stem from multiple levels of origin—it can refer to cultural differences between countries, organisations, or individuals (Vasilaki, 2011; Vriend et al., 2021). Some studies have explored how cultural distance between different country contexts play a role for organisations in cross-national mergers and acquisitions (Vasilaki, 2011). Other studies have explored how cultural distance can reduce the 'fit' between leaderships' own perception of their behaviour and how this behaviour is perceived by staff (Vriend et al., 2021). For this study, cultural distance in merger processes would refer to how different organisational cultures can create contestations and potential tensions during reorganisations and mergers.

The fourth and final type of distance to leadership we explore is *social distance*. Social difference refers to difference between leadership and staff based on differences in rank, social status and authority between leadership and staff (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002, p. 682). In the context of our study social distance between leadership and staff may increase during merger processes in cases when the new leadership is perceived as having a different academic rank, social status and applies another form of authority compared to before the merger. In this way leadership can be seen as socially distant to staff or seem more distance to some of the staff than others. Social distance between leadership and staff influences how leadership communication is perceived by staff and leadership effectiveness.

In the remaining part of the paper, we explore how these conceptualisations from the more general leadership literature might be related to academic staff and their leaders in academia (e.g., Bryman, 2007) and how these various forms of distance may be related (Collinson, 2005). The main take-away message from this brief overview is that there are more dimensions to distance than the physical—e.g., geographical distance—between leaders and staff.

## 3 | EMPIRICAL SETTING, DATA, AND METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

In 2015, the Norwegian government launched a large-scale reform aimed at improving quality and relevance in the Norwegian higher education system. One of the key instruments for this was to facilitate merger processes in the sector—six new multi-campus institutions were established when 17 universities and university colleges merged in 2016–2017. The paper builds on an analysis of these six new institutions. They differ in size, academic status, educational profile, merger process, internal geographical distances, and merger type (across or within the same institutional category). All institutions studied have several campuses ranging from 3 to 11. The institutions differ in terms of geographical distances internally, but in all the institutions the

distances can be seen as substantial. While the extreme examples include distances of over 800 km between campuses, on the lower end you have institutions where the longest physical distance between the campuses is around 100 km. All the institutions engaged in substantial re-organisation and merged study programmes and research groups across campuses and had instances where leaders of various units are located at one of the other campuses.

Data in this article draw from a large-scale qualitative interview-based study of these organisational transformations, conducted in the period between September 2020 and March 2021. The whole dataset includes 149 group and individual interviews with staff, research group and study programme leaders, department heads, deans, and various leadership roles at institutional level. Informants were selected purposefully, with an aim to cover the institution both hierarchically and horizontally. Interviews with academic staff were mostly conducted in groups, while most leaders were interviewed in individual interviews. The interviews were conducted by a large project group, and most interviews were done by two researchers and a research assistant. Since the interviews were conducted during the pandemic, they were carried out digitally on MS Teams.

The interviews focused on several aspects of the organisational integration of the new organisations. Different forms of distance to leadership were not a major core theme in the interviews. However, these different forms were spelled out as the informants told us about their experiences with the merger process and the new organisation that operated across geographical distances. Interviews with leaders on faculty and central level included among others the following themes: centralised/decentralised new organisation, the relationship between academic and administrative organisation, their experiences with leadership and steering across geographical distances, formal and informal organisation, structures for collaboration across campuses and organisational units, standardisation of study programmes across campuses, administrative resources and relationships between study programmes and research units. Study programme leaders and heads of departments and research groups got in addition also questions about their leadership role and resources, and experiences with leading across geographical distance. Interviews with academic staff (study programmes and research units) had a focus on the reorganisations of study programme and research groups, academic integration, quality and performance and their external relations. The interviews were recorded and transcribed in full text.

From a large total number of interviews, this article looked for interviews where "distance" is explicitly brought up as an issue. In several instances, this is done unprompted. This means that findings here should not be taken as a comprehensive assessment of distance to leadership in these specific organisational settings. Instead, the analysis here represents a first exploration to a merger setting may bring about different experiences of distance. This means that we might not capture all instances of cultural differences or perceptions of hierarchy when these have been explicitly described as "distance". With this in mind, the dataset for this article includes a selection of the total interviews (39 interviews), consisting of academic staff (8), leaders of study programmes (5) and research groups (6) and leadership at central (8), faculty (8) and department level (4) (see Table 1). When quotes were selected for the article, they were translated to English and shortened for readability and to assure anonymity, with specific caution to not alter the meaning. For concerns of anonymity, in some quotes specific labels/positions were replaced with more generic categories, specific geographical locations were removed, etc.

**TABLE 1** Overview of informants.

|  | Institution A | Institution B | Institution C | Institution D | Institution E | Institution F |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Levels | Study programmes and research units and faculty level | Study programmes, faculty level and university leadership | Study programmes, faculty level and university leadership | Academic staff and university leadership | Study programmes and research unites and university leadership | Study programmes and research units and faculty level |

The literature review for this article was done after the theme of "distance" emerged from initial exploration of the data. Based on the literature review, it became evident that distance to leadership has been explored widely in different types of literature, resonating with the initial observation that distance to leadership can be conceptualised in line with several perspectives. The analytical framework was developed based on existing categories of interpretations of distance to leadership in the literature, which were then employed as a lens to interpret various statements about distance in the empirical data. The diverse types of distances explored is based in the literature review, how these distance dimensions are intertwined is a result of the analysis.

# 4 | INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS: DIVERSE TYPES OF DISTANCE TO LEADERSHIP DURING MERGER PROCESSES

## 4.1 | Physical distance intertwined with cultural distance

The merger processes created new institutions that are vastly geographically spread out. The merger processes introduced increased physical distances in different areas, e.g., by setting up new administrative units, locating the top leadership at another campus, or merging educational programmes where the study programme leader was placed elsewhere. This physical and geographical distance created a challenge for leadership and staff, leadership became distant physically and this type of distance had other psychological and cultural side effects on the relationship between leadership and staff. From the point of view of leadership, the increased physical distance that resulted from the merger inhibited the possibility to be 'seen' by staff. We see this notion the integration process leading to experiences of not being 'seen' by leadership in reflections of leadership as well as in reflections by staff. This lack of 'being seen' by leadership is explicitly created by physical distances that increased due to the merger process.

> The organisation covers [several] hundred kilometres distance, it is not possible to be visible and seen by every staff member once a semester (institutional leadership).

The vast distances lead to a regret noted by leadership about not being present enough:

> I should have spent more time out in the faculties and with the research groups. I feel that. There has become a little too much distance between me as a [leadership position] and the active research communities. I have not managed that... Or my priorities have been wrong (institutional leadership).

The feeling of not being seen is confirmed by representatives from the academic staff. Yet, how come it is necessary 'to be seen' by leadership in an academic context? One interesting observation is how physical distance to leadership is described as creating a type of distance that influences the working culture:

> I have missed a focus on creating a decent work environment. I am thinking of a mapping of the psycho-social stuff, interests from the top leader and the system around my wellbeing as an employee. We were there before the merger, because then the leaders were closer, and we could have conversations around these things and the culture was easier (Head of research group).

It could be that the increased physical distances between leadership and staff acts as a counterforce to the integration process, that it is not the physical distance in itself that constitutes the challenge, but the fact that physical distance becomes more difficult during the re-organisation process when communication and contact between leadership and staff may be even more important.

## 4.2 | Physical distance intertwined with structural distance

The term structural distance is used in this paper to describe the experience of increasing hierarchy, longer decision-making processes, and an increase in the number of reporting levels between staff and the leadership. In a merger process, both structural distance and physical distance become larger. Being spread out across different campuses may also make it harder to involve staff in decision-making processes:

> Leaders have been good at having staff meeting, involve them. And others have been less good. Some have had difficulties because they have departments at four campuses and [several hundred] employees. The departments are large. So, they are like "How do I do this in a good way?" (Head of Department).

Academic staff experience that the structural distance, in terms of less face-to-face contact and more hierarchical levels, has increased. Increasing bureaucratisation create the feeling of distance and a sense of alienation to the new organisation.

> Merger leads to increased bureaucratisation and more distance, e.g., more levels. The distance between the operational level and the leadership level has increased. A large new organisation has been created which lives its own life (Head of research group).

This feeling of distance is in turn reinforced by the increased physical distance, which makes the decision-making processes longer, because less problems can be solved face-to-face, compared to the previous, smaller institution.

> There is a strong feeling of large distances. Previous leaders at smaller institutions could walk down the hallway and sort things out. The new institution is exceptionally large, with a large bureaucracy and long distances regarding decisions (Head of study programme).

When smaller previous university colleges merged with larger universities, the colleges became part of an organisation with large distances and the staff were frustrated that services were centralised. In the interviews, reflections are made about the fact that the frustration was related to larger distances despite centralisation. The smaller colleges had become part of a system that was much larger than the one they were used to.

> The new organisation is much more centralised than the former university college was, where academic autonomy was larger. In the new organisation the research groups are more distant to the levels above. The distance between levels has increased (Head of research group).

Yet, we do find examples of academic staff experiencing how the distance can be reduced, if not across levels in the organisation but within academic communities even if members are located physically distant to each other. Technology played an important role in reducing this experience of distance.

> The research group is continually active and has members at different campuses. Technology has helped reduce distances across campuses. Seminars have been held at teams (Head of research group).

Physical and structural distance are intertwined in the sense that when the new organisations were put in place, the re-organisation processes and new leadership roles were outlined alongside geographical re-structuring of the new

organisations. All the new organisations choose to introduce an entirely new academic organisation across previous institutions and campus locations. This decision may have contributed to create a feeling of structural distance increasing the physical distance within the new organisation, and vice versa. These decisions had an intention of building strong academic organisations, where the new organisation of faculties, departments, study programmes and research units was based on expectations of academic gains. This created extra pressure on academic staff to really engage in the merger process, get to know new colleagues from distant campuses, seeking to build new and integrated study programmes together. Such academic integration processes are challenging.

## 4.3 | Physical and social and cultural distance intertwined

In this paper, we apply the term social distance to describe how different emphasis on academic merits can increase when leaders and academic staff value this differently. The mergers were between universities and university colleges, and some were between university colleges, the latter having explicit ambitions of obtaining university status after the merger. Thus, the merger processes may have strengthened academic drift within the new organisations. At the same time, not all academic staff members from previous university colleges have strong research records and many are based in a practice- and profession-oriented academic culture. We do find examples related to how the new organisation puts more emphasis on research, which can increase the distance to the practical field.

> When academic staff get involved in research, the distance to the practice field increases (Academic staff).

Within the merged institutions, distance can also be created by the differences between groups in what kind of research they value. The informants reflect on the fact that the university ambition of the previous university colleges may increase distance between leadership catering for the university ambition, and academic staff with less strong track record in research.

This difference in academic traditions in combination with the university ambition and then in combination with large physical distances underscored the experience of distance in the new organisations.

> Our faculty is the largest, it covers [several hundred] kilometres, it was enough to try to build a common culture and identity related to our faculty…, and then implicitly to build a university culture, whatever a university culture would entail (Faculty leadership).

Different disciplinary profiles within single departments can according to academic staff also amplify experiences of geographical and structural distance.

> Geographical distances do not really hinder collaboration. It is more about differences in academic fields. Differences between academic fields within the department makes it unnatural to collaborate a lot (Head of Department).

However, academic staff note also, that being co-located increase collaboration across disciplinary boundaries. Thus, co-location can bridge social differences by way of reducing the geographical distance.

> To move location and be at the same location increases contact with other professional education programmes at the institution (Academic staff).

We do find that the social distance increased but it is related to the university ambition of the previous university colleges and how this created distance to the research tracks of the practice-based university colleges. Thus, the university ambition was a vision that created distance more indirectly rather than leaders explicitly having other academic credentials than employees. It is the type of merger ambition and increased academic drift which strengths the experience of distance. Thus, the ambitions of the merger projects of aiming at integrating, searching academic gains, and having strong aims of gaining university status increased the experience of distances internally in the new organisations.

## 4.4 | The interconnectedness of physical, structural, and cultural distance challenges organisational integration

The discussion of how structural and cultural distance is intertwined with physical distance in our empirical material illustrates how diverse types of distance work as counterforce to organisational integration during merger processes. To integrate the new organisation requires integration across different disciplinary profiles, cultures and across geographical and structural distance. This integration process is difficult for the new organisation, especially if it also involves an integration of university culture with a university college culture, and creates frustration among academic staff, but also among leadership.

> There is an increasing frustration and low level of commitment to the overall institutional project. Ineffectiveness and alienation are increasing based on distance. The distance between the academic environments and academic staff from the previous university colleges is exceptionally large. Also, the distance between the new university status and the academic level of staff is exceptionally large (Faculty leadership).

Academic staff note that due to the large distances, it is difficult for academic staff to meet and develop a sense of shared belonging. The geographical distances are seen as a hinderance to collaboration and integration in the new organisation. Like one of programme leaders note:

> It has been difficult to make this feel like a unit, to really be a unit, due to the long distances (Head of study programme)

There is an increasing experience of distance between academic staff interrelated to geographical and structural distance to leadership. In academic staff's view the new organisation is more professionalised regarding academic affairs and administration. But the distance between academics and the administration is seen as increasing. One of the interviewed relate this to the fact that distance between academic staff and faculty leadership has increased because distinct functions are located at different campuses. This contributes to the fact that academic staff experience that the distance to part of the administration is increasing. One interpretation could be that the feeling of distance is related to the lack of integration of the new organisation.

> The institution is an institution on paper. It has been designed without considering that places exist. Students are on cite, teaching happens on cite, not on lines on a sheet of paper (Head of study programme).

During the merger process, the feeling of being involved and having a say in decisions decreased. Also, top leadership reflect on this. However, it is not clear whether it is the growing size of the organisation that creates the feeling of distances or if it is the lack of involvement that creates this. What is noted is that the new organisation grew which led

to the fact that staff did not feel leaders were close, that they were distant. At the same time, they also experienced a loss of opportunity to take part in discussions and influence decisions. The feeling of distance is thus related to the growing size and complexity of the new organisation.

In some cases, other solutions were tried to reduce distance to leadership. To keep distance to leadership short, academic staff at one of the institutions argued that departments preferably should be organised according to campuses, yet again, this may be a hindrance to integration.

> Departments are organised according to campus. According to academic staff this was important to keep distance to leadership as short as possible. The drawback is of course that old structures may become sedimented (Faculty leadership).

Distance in general and distance to leadership is a counterforce to integration according to our informants. The distance is felt in terms of not being involved, lack of communication, high university ambitions and new structural arrangements creating a feeling of increased bureaucracy. Yet, one can only speculate, if physical distances were smaller, would the integration become smoother or is distance to leadership a term that in our cases is ascribed the status as a problem to integration?

## 5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We started this paper by asking: How can we conceptualise different forms of distance to leadership in the context of higher education? And how do different forms of distance interrelate in experiences of distance to leadership? The analysis indicates that in these merger processes physical distance can function as a proxy for other perceptions of distances, such as structural, cultural, and social distance. In our material, physical distance is also related to these forms of distances, the relationship is not unidirectional.

Studies on leadership and distance have documented that physical distance is a hindrance to effective leadership performance (Carsten et al., 2021; Howell et al., 2005; Humala, 2015; Neufeld et al., 2010). The multi-campus institutions were created through mergers between universities and university colleges, and between university college. Staff at all governance levels experience difficulties related to the geographically dispersed new organisations. Our analysis show that the physical distances can inhibit the needed interactional closeness.

The reorganisation processes involved mergers that span across large geographical distances creating multi-campus institutions which have engaged in creating stronger organisational integration and new institutions. Obviously and not entirely unexpectedly, a sense of increasing structural distance is pronounced. One could argue that this experience of distance would be related to geographical distance, and that this would therefore be most pronounced at the institutions with greater geographical distribution. Yet, structural distance is a challenge in all institutions across the interview material regardless of how geographically spread out they are. New larger institutions often also mean stronger steering. Earlier studies have also emphasised considerable concerns with centralisation and too much power being concentrated among top leadership in merger processes (Elken et al., 2020). Similarly in the analysis in this article, structural distance is also associated with long decision-making lines and increased bureaucracy. The empirical analysis point in the directions that physical and structural distance can amplify the effects of each other. We have seen that the sense of long vertical organisational lines becomes amplified due to geography, as informal face-to-face contact with leaders is reduced and opportunities to develop trust are reduced. Also here, further studies could study such interactions from a more micro-perspective to understand how this changes communication in practice.

We find examples that cultural distance referring to differences in values and communication styles due to organisational cultures. Nevertheless, this concern is more implicit, as challenges concerning the streamlining of the organisation are emphasised instead. Yet, the distance to the university ambition of the merged institutions

seems to be one source creating cultural distance between leadership with this vision and academic staff from less research-intensive backgrounds.

Higher education institutions are organisations where some of the usual factors of social distance between staff and leadership are different than in a typical hierarchical business organisation. There are other social factors that do play a role in constituting social distance, e.g., individual merits and academic prestige which can become activated when various kinds of institutions merge. We do not find a strong focus on social distance on its own, but rather a more intertwined version that relates to cultural distance. Clearly there is a difference between the cultural and social differences between university and college cultures, and it also matters what kind of merits that are expected and promoted in an institution with a university ambition.

More in concrete the analysis shows how these mergers resulted in major reorganisations to achieve academic gains. As a result, academic drift and specific pressures of academic integration may have increased the challenges offered by increasing distances. Yet it also points out that distance is a multifaceted term that operates along different dimensions, not least as leaders operate on multiple levels of the organisation. When physical distance to leaders increases, new tensions emerge. Various forms of distance interact, intersect, and interrelate. At times, these may mitigate a sense of physical distance and may amplify tensions and challenges.

The contribution of the paper is to show how distance to leadership is a multi-facetted phenomenon which may come to the fore during organisational reorganisations. Pinheiro et al. (2017, p. 1) argues that "geography lies at the heart of a multi-campus system". While this places distance at the centre of debates concerning mergers that result in multi-campus institutions, distance has often viewed as a purely geographical matter. Mergers, distance, and leadership have to our knowledge not been analysed the way we have done by exploring perceptions of different forms of distance to leadership in merger processes. In this article, a more multifaceted view on distance was adopted, as we explore different forms of distance to leadership. When discussing physical and geographical distances, means, availability and affordability of transportation could play a role. This implies that geography and physical distance probably obtain a different role in Norway which is not as densely populated compared to many other countries in Europe. Moreover, a multifaceted view on distance also introduces elements such as cultural and social distance. This is also embedded in broader cultural values in Norway, where more egalitarian views are present, which may have consequences for how, e.g., structural distance is perceived. Direct transferability of findings to other multi-campus settings should therefore be done with a degree of caution.

The analysis has shown that distance to leadership is a point of concern in mergers and that several types of distance interplay and intersect during the integration process. As such, distance to leadership is not just a metaphor, but a geographical feature of large, multi-campus institutions. Yet, the feeling of distance to leadership is amplified by structural and to some extent cultural distance coming into play during integration.

This analysis has been explorative and has opened several avenues for further analysis. For example, while informants across different levels have been interviewed, the significance of the level is not really shown in the analysis, which would present a worthwhile avenue for further research. Moreover, we have examined what other forms of distance are referred to when distance is being explicitly discussed. This approach has certain methodological limitations in that it takes a starting point in explicit references to 'distance,' rather than other more veiled references to experience of distance—whether geographical, structural, social, or cultural. Future studies could therefore take a more expanded approach to understand various forms of experiencing distance.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

**Nicoline Frølich:** Investigation; funding acquisition; writing – original draft; methodology; writing – review and editing; formal analysis; project administration; conceptualization. **Mari Elken:** Conceptualization; investigation; funding acquisition; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Thea Eide:** Investigation; validation; software; data curation; writing – review and editing.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There are no conflicts of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

The project and the data gathering have been approved by the Norwegian Data Protection Authority, the data in this paper have been reported in such a way to cater for the anonymity of participants.

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