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Restructuring Higher Education for Public Service: Implications of the EIMPA – IDM Merger on Academic Staff

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Abstract
The Ministry of Public Service initiated a structural reform process of merging the Eswatini Institute of Management and Public Administration (EIMPA) and the Institute of Development Management (IDM). This reform followed the dissolution of the IDM tripartite partnership between Botswana, Lesotho, and Eswatini, which governed IDM. The merger aimed to establish a single, nationally governed institution for civil service training. While the policy rationale for the merger was articulated in official statements, its potential implications for EIMPA's academic staff were not formally examined. This study investigated the anticipated impact of the proposed merger on EIMPA academic personnel. It focused on how lecturers perceived the transition in relation to their job security, roles, institutional affiliation, professional identity, and participation in the process. This transition raised critical questions about its implications for the academic staff, about whether they would be automatically retained in the merged entity, redeployed, or expected to reapply. A descriptive case study design was employed, targeting all thirteen academic staff. Given the small population size, the study used a census sampling approach, enabling full participation. Data was collected through structured questionnaires, allowing for both quantitative and qualitative data. The findings generated insights to inform more inclusive and transparent merger processes. It also contributed to the broader discourse on institutional restructuring in public service education, particularly in small states undergoing administrative reforms. Ultimately, the study aimed to support evidence-based decision-making and ensured that the voices of academic staff were considered in shaping the future of public service training in Eswatini.

Introduction

Both private and public higher education institutions in Africa and globally are forever undergoing some form of transformation. Most of these reforms take the form either an upgrade of colleges to university status, or two institutions merge to form one institution. Driving forces for these transformations vary from one context to the other. Mostly, institutions transform for institutional efficiency and effectiveness. Some undergo reforms to be aligned with industry demands, national and global priorities. Governments also promote such initiates as strategies for improving the long-term sustainability of these institutions as some are known to provide duplicate services, which each competing for an insignificant market share. Some institutions, especially the old ones, continue to hold onto programmes, which even though have historical value to the founders, are no longer responsive to the ever-changing societal needs. In a majority of cases, these reforms are a response to the increase in student enrolments, reduced government funding for higher education, and increased performance standards. Yet, during these major transformations and the justifications behind them, their effect on the human resources in these institutions is often discarded. Academic staff are the most affected during the transition, as job insecurities, disrupted career pathways and diminished professional identities creep in and lead to unintended organizational challenges and behavioural outcomes (Baloyi & Naidoo, 2016).

Against this backdrop, restructuring in Eswatini's public tertiary sector mirrors broader global dynamics, yet remains under-documented (Maine, 2014). The proposed merger between EIMPA and IDM clearly spells out how the academic staff of training institutions are critically affected by organizational change. The absence of clear, timely and transparent communication coupled with ineffective stakeholder consultations early on in the change process, alters the perceptions of those at the centre of the change about the change. It then becomes critical to closely examine the feasibility, acceptability and potential consequences of the merger. This study therefore situates the EIMPA-IDM transformation within the wider scholarship on higher education restructuring, highlighting both the policy intentions and the human dimensions that shape institutional transition processes.

Background of the study

During mergers and acquisitions, higher education institutions are compelled to adapt to their dynamic operating environments. Mergers result in significant changes in the statuses of the institutions involved, as each transition from one phase to another (Baloyi & Naidoo, 2016). Merger processes of this magnitude are typically driven by a few policy makers who usually have hidden agendas behind the reforms. While some may genuinely seek to improve institutional performance, others may only be interested in positioning themselves or their acquaintances within the newly formed entity. The researcher has observed that most merging institutions do not change at the same pace as the individuals who identity with those institutions. As result, negative implications follow those staff members, particularly those who are not privy to the strategic justifications behind sudden reforms and are thus underprepared for the transition. Unfortunately, any negative reaction to a change is automatically labelled as resistance to change by those who have influence over the change process, regardless of whether it was due to feeling excluded rather than unwillingness.

EIMPA as a school of government

EIMPA was established in 1975 as the one and only school of government of Eswatini to conduct overall in-service training for all civil servants, operating alongside Ministry of Education and Training (MOET)'s INSERT department which only focused on in-service training for teachers. Even though EIMPA has undergone reforms in the past, they were mainly focused on the client based and had no major effects on institutional existence and culture. The proposed merger, however, has far-reaching consequences. This magnitude of restructuring is of particular interest because it directly affects the human resources of the department. Such a process inevitably involves changes in habits, organizational culture, strategy, staffing levels, and the skills required in the new entity, factors that were not present in EIMPA's earlier reforms which focused mainly on the changes in the targeted market. The proposed merger introduces unprecedented uncertainties, including possible staff redundancies and new administrative procedures.

The EIMPA-IDM case illustrates these tensions vividly. Since its inception, EIMPA has served as Eswatini's school of government, mandated to build capacity across the public service. It operates on a government-allocated budget through which all ministries and departments access training. Academic staff, as civil servants, have historically enjoyed the job security associated with permanent and pensionable employment while supporting government performance through in-service training. By contrast, IDM, operated under the regional tripartite arrangement, and received partial government subvention along-side its fee-based and semi-autonomous model. A merger of these two institutions raised complex questions pertaining to governance, funding, and institutional identity.

Although the underlying rationale for the merger was not communicated to staff from either institution, the process was initiated shortly after the dissolution of IDM's tripartite partnership among Botswana, Lesotho, and Eswatini, a structure that had historically underpinned IDM's regional operations. When Botswana closed its campus, concerns emerged regarding the viability of the Eswatini campus. It appears that, in response, the Ministry of Public Service opted to preserve IDM's presence by merging it with EIMPA under a new, nationally governed structure. Yet, the absence of a transparent policy direction and stakeholder consultation undermined this intention, generating staff anxiety about the future functioning of the merged institution.

For EIMPA academic staff, the implications go beyond routine restructuring. Concerns arise regarding the future of public service training. If the new entity adopts a commercial orientation similar to IDM's, the cost and accessibility of training for government ministries may be compromised, undermining in-service training at a time when it is critical. Questions also surface concerning the professional identity of lecturers, the protection of their rights and privileges, and the preservation of EIMPA's mandate as a department dedicated to civil service strengthening.

The researcher also questions the Ministry's role in managing two institutions that shared premises and once competed for clients. The Ministry had previously instructed EIMPA to discontinue fee-generating services and limit its mandate to government-funded training, which weakened its competitiveness. Presenting the merger as a solution for EIMPA's perceived lack of viability somewhat ignores the policy constraints that are rigidly tied to its performance. This raises concern on whether the human effects of the transformation were going to be addressed given that they affect the morale, sense of security and institutional culture of the employees.

Furthermore, the abolishment of EIMPA posts presents immediate concerns about the security of the employment of staff. Staff remain uncertain whether the new institution will absorb any or all of them, whether they will have to be redeployed to other government departments or worse, required to reapply for contract-based appointments. This aligns with broader scholarly observations that, although mergers are often introduced for efficiency, they frequently destabilise staff and create unintended human resource challenges (Harmen & Harman, 2003).

Reforms of a similar fashion have been previously introduced to the Eswatini Government system by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). However, all the reforms cited in this article have no full or official documentation that the researcher could access. One of these was a proposed merger between the Vaal College of Technology (VUT) and the Eswatini

College of Technology (ECOT) formerly known as SCOT. The justification for the merger was to upgrade ECOT into university status and become the first university of technology nationally. The merger did not reach finalization. Similarly, MOET pushed the University of Eswatini (UNESWA) to absorb two teacher training institutions, Ngwane and William Pitcher, and ECOT's teacher training department to become one national teacher training institution. Again, this initiative did not reach fruition.

The incomplete nature and failure of these change initiatives suggest potential political, legal, or operational obstacles, an area that may be worth future research. The common factor among all these attempts is the limited consideration of the impact of the said reforms on the humans directly linked to the institutions (Mahloane, 2009). One could argue that had these earlier attempted merger processes been properly documented and lessons learnt from their failure to yield the results expected by policy makers also clearly documented, other ministries like public service could have benefitted from those earlier experiences and possibly approached the EIMPA-IDM merger differently. Worth noting is that public sector mergers are more complex and entail the abolishment of existing posts and prospective early retirement of previously permanent and pensionable employees. This uniqueness calls for more consideration and the conducting of expert-driven cost-benefit analysis on the part of the change originator.

Sudden higher education institution transformations such as the EIMPA-IDM merger have a negative impact on long-service employees whose being can no longer be separated from the culture of the institutions they have served for years. What usually worsens their anxieties is the absence of clear communication about the change, its justifications and its possible outcomes. When merger information spreads primarily through the grapevine, trust is lost, instead, fears are amplified, which further creates confusion on the actual reasons behind the change. However, this is common occurrence, even internationally, mergers are well known for limited, if any consultation, opaque decision-making, eroded trust, reduced moral and failed reforms. The case under investigation inhibits similar risks, as a top-down approach, it lacks the main recipe for merger success, stakeholder engagement.

Although mergers are commonly presented as progress+6sive reforms that enhance efficiency and sustainability, they often generate apprehension among academic staff, whose careers and professional identities may be disrupted. This study therefore examined the anticipated effects of the proposed merger on EIMPA academic personnel, focusing on their perceptions of job security, roles, institutional belonging, professional identity, and engagement in the decision-making process.

Statement of the problem

The sudden proposed merger between EIMPA and IDM unfolded in a contextual environment clouded by poor stakeholder participation, and lack of clear communication about the merger, which if not swiftly addressed, could result in significant uncertainty. When EIMPA academic staff, being the key drivers of public sector training and development, first heard about the merger, they seemed to have dismissed it as an unfounded rumour. It would have been hard for anyone in their shoes, who had seen the institution evolve over the years, to accept the possible ambiguity brought about by the change, to accept the overnight job losses in an institution that was known for its stability. Despite the rumours, no one had bothered to visit the institute, to clarify or clear the rumours, or even share the objectives of the transformation, if indeed it was the new direction that the government was taking. Then the questions became unavoidable, the fears about watching their entire dreams collapse in front of them began to creep in. The study therefore critically examined the implications of the proposed merger for EIMPA lecturers at a time when policy makers were too busy to acknowledge the damage that the transformation might cause to staff members.

Research objectives

The research centred on the objectives outlined below:

1. To examine academic staff perceptions of the proposed EIMPA-IDM merger.
2. To assess the anticipated implications of the merger for job security and the roles, responsibilities, and workload of EIMPA academic staff.
3. To determine how the merger influences staff members' sense of institutional affiliation and professional identity.
4. To determine the extent of the involvement of academic staff in the merger decision-making process.

Significance of the study

Firstly, the study provides empirical evidence on a restructuring process that, at the time of data collection, was largely characterised by speculation and incomplete information. By documenting the academic staff perspectives of the merger, the research shed light on the human dimensions of the institutional reform, an aspect that is often overlooked in most centrally controlled reforms. Secondly, the study elevated the voices of academic staff whose insights concerning administrative changes in higher education institution changes are frequently marginalised. Notwithstanding the fact that the cooperation and participation of academic staff during transformations plays a crucial role in their eventual success or failure, their opinions are usually informally sought long after the merger implementation had collapsed. Thirdly, the study's findings will inform future public-sector reforms of this nature.

Conceptual framework

The study adopted the Organizational Change theory (OCT). This framework provides a complementary perspective for interpreting how public higher education institutions in Eswatini, specifically EIMPA, circumnavigate organizational challenges, restraints regarding resources and organizational change, such as the proposed merger with IDM. The framework demonstrates that a sound organizational plan followed by the involvement of key stakeholders and clear communication are recipes for successful organizational change. To effectively lead organizational change, pioneers' must build a sense of urgency, develop sound guiding principles, draft a compelling vision followed by strategy, clarify the vision for all, create an enabling environment for employees to implement the vision, generate and consolidate tangible short-term gains and infuse new behaviours into the organizational culture (Kotter, 1996).

In this context, OCT clarifies staff perceptions of the EIMPA-IDM merger. The reactions of the academic staff to the merger could be influenced by some of these factors.

- Transparency and communication: the lack of transparency and limited information regarding merger processes can create uncertainty, which often results to resistance to the change in question.

- Employee participation: consulting staff on any ongoing change strengthens commitment to the change and may result in the decline in fears of retrenchment and changes in job roles due to the merger.
- Organizational culture: during a merger process, two or more organizations are integrated, resulting to possible clashes in norms and institutional cultures, values and beliefs.
- Readiness for change: overall readiness for changes requires resources, policies, and leadership support to be in place, if not, this affects the success of structural transformations.

The OCT framework helps us to understand why some academic staff members support the merger and why others express concern. Linking staff perceptions to precise change management processes can identify areas where interventions which may include effective communication strategies and participatory planning may mitigate negative impacts of merger processes while at the same time, enhancing the achievement of merger outcomes.

Literature review

Restructuring of higher education institutions has become a normal reformation strategy in both developed and developing contexts like Eswatini. These types of reform are prone, where governments are faced with raised standards of performance which call for improved institutional efficiency, and the provision of academic programmes that align to national priorities, in light of limited budgets. The most dominant forms of reform are mergers, consolidations and institutional alliances. The alleged benefits of such transformations are a reduction in the duplication of academic services, strengthened governance, and a drop in rivalry among institutions (Curaj, Georghiou, Harper, & Egron-Polak, 2015). Nonetheless, research reveals that policy makers consistently neglect the impact of such reforms on academic staff, whose identities, careers and entire existence have been shaped by their belonging to the changing institutions.

This section reviews the global and African literature on higher education mergers, structured around the four research objectives guiding the present study: (1) staff perceptions of institutional mergers; (2) implications for job security, roles, and workloads; (3) effects on institutional affiliation and professional identity; and (4) staff engagement in merger decision-making. The review situates the proposed EIMPA-IDM merger within these broader dynamics to illuminate the potential human implications of the reform.

Objective 1: Academic staff perceptions of higher education mergers

The perceptions of academic staff with regard to institutional mergers become a critical lens through which the merger can be understood. According to scholarly evidence, academic staff perceptions strongly influence their responses through either support and compliance, or through resistance and disengagement towards the merger (Harmen & Harman, 2003). As most mergers are usually initiated without proper consultations and clarity, they tend to be disruptive and result in anxiety due to the uncertainty that characterises these forms of change. Studies from the African context highlight that mergers are perceived as inadequately justified, if justified at all, and are also externally imposed, which makes those with possible answers, further from the ordinary employees of the affected organizations. The studies show that this then leads to sceptical, fearful and emotionally strained staff (Mahloane, 2009).

Effective communication is the central driver of any organizational merger, and perceptions of employees of those evolving organizations are positive about the merger. In instances where change agents fail to communicate regularly, timeously, consistently and completely about a looming change process, the academic staff involved begin to fill the gaps through the grapevine and conclude whatever their speculation permits, as well articulated by literature (Bordia, Hobman, Jones, Gallois, & Callan, 2004). Such environments are not pleasant to be in during these times of rumours, uncertainty and roaming negativity. Equally, clear, updated and informative communication enables staff to understand the rationale of the change and automatically have balanced views of the merger (Harmen & Harman, 2003).

Inequalities with regard to administrative and governance models, the business standing of merging partners and amount of resources at the time of the merger also influence the perceptions of staff. Staff that belong to the less dominant institution may fear being marginalised or absorbed by the other institution (Skodvin, 2014). In African contexts, where institutions vary in terms of political influence, divergent fiscal models and levels of autonomy, the fears are more pronounced. The merger between the two public service institutions depict similar irregularities: EIMPA is wholly owned by government and provides in-service training and consultancy services, IDM is partially independent with a wider client coverage and is a fee-based service provider. These incongruences are likely to negatively influence the perceptions of the EIMPA academic staff toward the merger.

Overall, evidence from regional and global studies stress that the success or failure of institutional mergers rests in the views and opinions of the employees present during the introduction of the change. According to research, it matters how staff absorb and interpret the news of the merger, how they react and engage with the merger processes. This directly influences the institutional cohesion, and whether implementation yields long-term stability.

Objective 2: Implications of mergers for job security, roles, and workloads

Job security concerns comprise some of the most significant and widely reported effects of higher education mergers. Numerous studies show that staff fear redundancy, redeployment, or deterioration in employment terms when mergers are implemented (Arnold, Stofile, & Lillah, 2013). These fears are particularly acute when merging institutions operate under different employment frameworks. For example, if one institution is self-governed but receives a substantive subvention, and the other is completely bureaucratic and operates within a rigid budget, staff from the public entity may worry that their permanent employment status and pay grades may be synchronized unfavourably (Frumkin, 2003). This has been reinforced by research in African countries such as Botswana, South Africa and Zimbabwe, where reforms led to uncertainties over loss of permanent jobs and loss of prospective careers (Chiguvi, 2022).

Over and above the weakened job security, there is always the possibility of significant alteration to individual workloads and a great shift in academic roles. Harmonizing the curricular from two or more distinct institutions with diverse structures often expands staff responsibilities, especially in the short-term (Pinheiro, Geschwind, & Aarrevaara, 2016). The workload is usually intensified by having staff from different academic backgrounds and specialisations try to consolidate and align their previous programmes to fit new expectations while at the same time navigating the newly laid down administrative procedures, over and above expanded teaching duties. These added responsibilities are worse in African environments usually characterised by resource constraints, poor infrastructure and shortage of staff. In South Africa for instance, studies have reported serious challenges following mergers, including a decline in productivity, staff burnout, and low staff morale (Arnold, Stofile, & Lillah, 2013).

Public-sector training institutions face unique pressures. Literature on African public administration training centres notes that mergers may shift institutions from government-mandated training models toward revenue-generating or mixed-funding systems, altering staff responsibilities and expectations (Lameck, 2023). This is particularly relevant for EIMPA, which historically functioned under a civil-service mandate, in contrast to IDM's fee-based model. A merger may therefore not only restructure job roles but redefine academic workloads and expectations in ways that significantly affect staff morale and motivation.

Objective 3: Institutional affiliation and professional identity

The pride of academic staff relies heavily on both professional identity and institutional affiliation as their stronghold. Professional identity refers to the perceived scholarly roles, discipline, norms and the apparent contributions of academic staff to their institution. In contrast, institutional affiliation describes the emotional connection of academic staff to their institution's values, history, vision and culture (Henkel, 2005).

As demonstrated in research, these unique features are the first to be disrupted if a merger occurs. The new organizational roadmap usually calls for the displacement of institutional origins, norms and symbols, which then forces staff to renegotiate new professional and institutional identities (Skodvin, 2014). Transitions of this magnitude are not only haphazard, but they are also complicated, and cause employee nostalgia and eventual disengagement. On writing about neighbouring South African mergers, a scholar, Jansen, in 2002, found that staff from the less advantaged institution lost their identities and displayed a cultural shift (Jansen, 2002). In Lesotho, similar sentiments were shared, the diluted institutional missions, overshadowed by the restructuring processes led to a number of protests by staff members (Mushonga & Heidi, 2020).

These challenges are especially pronounced where merging institutions differ in mission or ethos. In the case of public-service training institutions, academic identity is closely tied to state-building, national development, and civil-service professionalism (Lewis, 2014). EIMPA lecturers, many of whom have long histories within a government department framework, may thus experience strong identity displacement if the merged institution adopts IDM's more commercialised or semi-autonomous orientation.

The literature therefore suggests that mergers can lead to weakened institutional affiliation, diminished professional identity, and reduced engagement if identity transitions are not managed sensitively. Such risks are likely in the EIMPA–IDM merger, given the institutions' culturally and structurally divergent histories.

Objective 4: Staff engagement and participation in merger decision-making

The level of engagement of relevant stakeholders during merger decision making processes is a critical ingredient for general acceptance of the merger across the organization and the post-merger integration of all those affected by the change. When merger decisions allow for employee participation, the trust that is strengthened, combined with enhanced transparency, both reduce staff resistance (Kotter, 1996). Equally, neglecting to involve staff during the top-down approach to a merger increases resentment and mistrust towards the merger and those in authority, which reduces employee commitment when it matters the most (Anderson, 2020).

Most African high education mergers point out the lack of purposeful involvement of stakeholders especially staff as a tenacious problem. Studies in some African states such as Botswana, Lesotho, South Africa and Zimbabwe state that the major concerns for staff, is missing out on the merger information during its conceptualization and ultimately its implementation (Mahloane, 2009). These negative experiences often led to similarly negative perceptions of political interference, divergent targets and general unfairness of those leading the merger. Even when staff reported the presence of consultation mechanisms, they were only seen as symbol rather than instrumental in granting staff the opportunities to interrogate and redirect the change where necessary.

Below are the best practices in introducing mergers of organizations:

- Early engagement of staff
- Transparent human resource frameworks
- Clear communication of timelines and processes
- Joint merger committees with representative membership
- Opportunities for staff to contribute to academic and administrative restructuring

Failure to adhere to the above merger best practices, promotes internal conflict and reduces the chance of post-merger coherence. Earlier merger attempts in the Eswatini higher education sector did not meet intended objectives. All institutions still operate independently, to date, which could have been so as a result of lack of adequate consultation. These lessons echo the importance of assessing the extent to which EIMPA academic staff have been engaged in the merger process.

Methodology

Research design

The study adopted a descriptive case study design which allowed for the careful examination of the Academic staffs' perceptions of the EIMPA-IDM proposed merger. The design was mostly appropriate because the case comprised of a real-life, bounded institutional phenomenon, which unfolded within two distinct institutions, each with its own governance structure, beliefs and norms and mandates (Bocharova, 2025).

Higher education research usually calls for the documentation of participant views, emerging issues, and human reactions while avoiding the manipulation of variables. Descriptive case studies allow for this dynamic to be accomplished during research. In this particular case, which was more of a politically sensitive reform, the research design permitted a holistic understanding of the possible shifts in job security, roles, identities, and institutional cultures as perceived by academic staff.

Study population and sampling

EIMPA is a small unit with only 13 specialised academic staff members overall. Due to the small population size, the researcher opted for a census sampling since each member might have their own unique views of the phenomenon under investigation (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2025).

Data collection instrument

A questionnaire was designed for data collection. It was then converted to google forms for ease of access by the academic staff. To understand the critical dimensions of the staff during the reform, the research incorporated both open and closed ended questions into the data collection instrument. The questionnaire items were directly tied to the study's research objectives and focused on the following themes:

1. Perceptions of the merger
2. Anticipated changes in job security, roles, responsibilities, and workloads
3. Implications for institutional affiliation and professional identity
4. Participation and consultation in the merger process

For the closed-ended items, a five-point Likert scale that ranged between strongly disagree and strongly agree was utilised as it enabled the levels of concern or agreement to be quantified. For the open-ended items respondents were given a chance to articulate their deep thoughts, feelings and explanations which were not going to be captured through quantitative measures (Bryman, 2016).

Validity and reliability

To enhance validity and reliability of the data collection tool, the researcher sought the expert opinions of two higher education researchers and two senior managers at the Ministry of Public Service. Their feedback was used to refine the questionnaire for clarity and alignment to the research objectives. A pilot test was conducted with two EIMPA senior management officials who were not part of the academic staff but had deep familiarity with institutional processes. The pilot helped refine wording, eliminate ambiguous questions, and ensure that the instrument would capture accurate and context-sensitive information.

Reliability was strengthened by:

- using standardised Likert-scale items,
- maintaining consistent wording across items, and
- ensuring logical alignment between questions and study objectives.

The combination of expert review and piloting improved both the trustworthiness and measurement consistency of the instrument.

Data Analysis

Data was analysed using descriptive statistics. These statistics provided a clear depiction of the distribution of perceptions across the sampled academic staff and enabled comparison across the four thematic areas. Qualitative responses to open-ended questions were analysed using

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, which involved (Braun & Clarke, 2006):

- Familiarisation with responses
- Generating initial codes
- Searching for themes
- Reviewing themes
- Defining and naming themes
- Producing the final narrative analysis

Ethical considerations

The researcher acknowledged that the merger was a highly political process and a very sensitive matter to the staff. Hence participation was strictly voluntary, and the questionnaire had all the information pertaining to the study, to limit interactions with the researcher, which might have been mistaken as influence over participation.

Key ethical measures included:

- Informed consent obtained electronically before participation
- No identifying information was captured
- Opinions were strictly confidential
- Only the research had access to the responses

Due to the political sensitivity of the merger process, the researcher ensured that participants privately participated in the study, so that they willingly expressed their views without fear of negative consequences. No pressure was put on those who had not responded after reasonable time had elapsed.

Findings

The target population for the study was all 13 EIMPA academic staff members, and a census sampling technique was employed. Out of the 13 staff, only 6 responded to the questionnaire, resulting in a 46% response rate. Given the sensitive nature of the case, the response rate was acceptable to the researcher, even though it was modest. For organizational research covering sensitive reforms such as the EIMPA-IDM merger, it is expected that staff may hesitate to give their views (Baruch & Holtom, 2008). This particular case was also politically driven, which could have exacerbated staff fears about being associated with the study. The responses collected were considered enough for the purpose of deducing insights into the perceptions of academic staff at the transition period. Demographic information, even though captured during data collection, was not reported as part of the findings to avoid a link to respondents, given the small population size

This section presents the findings of the research based on responses from the six academic staff members (46% of the EIMPA academic workforce) who completed the questionnaire. The objectives of the study (perceptions of the merger, anticipated implications for the employment conditions, merger effects on institutional identity and inclusion in merger decision-making process) were used as a basis for reporting the findings and incorporated the descriptive statistics, thematic analysis and extracts of verbatim feedback. To a larger extent, academic staff were of the view that the merger was clouded by substantial uncertainty, some level of optimism, though cautious, and their concern with regard to the transformation varied from one staff member to the next.

Objective 1: academic staff perceptions of the proposed EIMPA–IDM merger

The study revealed that the staff varied in terms of their perceptions of the initiation of the merger, with a majority expressing some reservations. Out of the six respondents, only two (33%) viewed the merger as likely to be beneficial with prospects for improved administrative systems and comprehensive programme offerings. They anticipated opportunities for strengthened institutional capacity and visibility of the merged institution in Eswatini. As one participant stated that the merger had the potential to promote diverse and market-driven programmes, thus earning wide recognition country-wide. This signified careful optimism which relied on the effective implementation of the reform.

In contrast, a larger percentage, four respondents (67%), expressed major concern and uncertainty about the proposed merger. These academic staff members termed the merger process as unclear, lacked effective communication, and was misaligned with EIMPA’s historical mandate. Their concerns included the lack of detailed justification for the merger and the sense that decisions were being taken at higher levels with little explanation. One respondent expressed this anxiety plainly: “The little information we have received so far is fragmented, no one wants to own up the process, even senior managers. It seems that even though the decision to merge was made at the top, there was adequate justification”.

Staff also wondered whether the differences in the two institutions’ funding models and internal cultures will not affect compatibility of the newly merged entity. For instance, EIMPA is exclusively a government department mandated to train only civil servants, whereas IDM provides training across sectors, including private clients, school leavers, and regional participants. This deviation contributed to fear that EIMPA’s public-sector identity might be overshadowed.

Generally, staff perceptions under this objective suggested that while the reform is seen as having potential benefits, the prevalent sentiment is one of cautiousness, stemming mostly from gaps in communication, institutional dissimilarities, and uncertainty about the merger’s primary purpose.

Objective 2: anticipated implications of the merger for job security, roles, responsibilities, and workload

Results under this objective indicate that the EIMPA academic staff expected notable implications for their employment security, roles, and workload. Four respondents (67%) stated clear anxieties about job security, observing that the merger raises questions about whether all existing posts will be reserved in the newly formed entity. Staff were alarmed about possible repetition of positions, especially given that IDM already employs its own academic personnel. As one respondent noted, “We do not know whether all positions will exist after the proposed merger. That doubt is demoralizing.” The lack of explicit job-protection declarations from public service management heightened this worry.

Part of the respondents (50%) also expected possible changes in roles and responsibilities. They suspected that they might be required to work across wider programme scopes, engage with more diverse training audiences, or adapt to IDM's existing curriculum and administrative systems. These role shifts were perceived as potentially increasing complexity and requiring new forms of adaptation. Staff expressed concerns that the merger might involve teaching non-civil-service participants or adopting new curriculum structures without adequate training or preparation.

Additionally, four respondents (67%) believed that the union would likely result in augmented workload, especially during the conversion period. They cited curriculum harmonisation, streamlining of administrative processes, and adjustment to new organisational expectations as key drivers of workload pressure. Some participants felt that the institution had not yet articulated how these stretched duties would be accomplished or rewarded (33%). Notwithstanding these dreads, some respondents were optimistic and felt that the merger could open room to new opportunities such as affiliations with key regional players, innovative instructional resources, and advanced capacity building programs.

Objective 3: influence of the merger on institutional affiliation and professional identity

These findings revealed that the change process had significant implications for staff's sense of institutional connection and professional identity. A bulk of the respondents (67%) stated that they feared the erosion of EIMPA's enduring identity as a dedicated civil service training institute. Academic staff expressed strong emotional attachment to this identity, which they believed separated EIMPA from other training institutions in Eswatini. The merger was therefore alleged as potentially threatening this unique identity. One respondent voiced this concern clearly: "EIMPA has always been about civil servants. Once we merge, what will distinguish us?"

Likewise, three respondents (50%) stated hesitation about their future professional identity within the newly merged institution. They were irresolute whether their roles, titles, and expert contributions would continue to be recognised or valued. Some questioned how their expertise in public administration training would fit into a more commercially oriented model like the current IDM administration. Participants also noted possible cultural strains, as IDM is perceived as a semi-commercial entity, while EIMPA is fully government-run. These cultural differences amplified concerns about the compatibility of the institutions' beliefs and work values.

Notwithstanding these challenges, all the respondents voiced a strong desire to see EIMPA's mandate conserved in the newly merged institution. They emphasised the significance of maintaining the institute's civil-service orientation, its public-sector philosophy, and the professional acknowledgement of the academic staff who specialise in training government employees. This substantiates that while staff may be open to institutional progression, they want it to occur without losing the organisational culture and professional identity that have shaped the institution for the past 50 years.

Objective 4: extent of staff engagement and involvement in the merger decision-making process

The findings under the last objective disclose that staff participation in the merger decision-making process has been negligible. All respondents (100%) specified that they were not consulted in any of the stages of the merger deliberations and learned about the proposed institutional merger at the same time as the general public. Participants described this as a top-down process that left them feeling excluded and undervalued. One participant noted, “We heard about the merger from peers who had seen the announcement in the news. No briefing was done for staff,” accentuating the complete absence of regulated internal communication about the transformation.

Five respondents (83%) further stated that communication regarding the merger has been irregular, informal, or inadequate. They labelled the information received as “strewn,” “unclear,” or “mostly hearsay,” which contributed to uncertainty and anxiety. The lack of consistent communication on timelines, transition procedures, organisational structures, and job implications made it difficult for staff to sufficiently prepare for or understand the scope of the merger.

Notwithstanding these challenges, four respondents (67%) conveyed a strong desire to be involved more actively in the transformation. They felt that their institutional knowledge and practical acumens could contribute substantively to the overall planning and execution phases. Participants suggested the establishing of structured discussion channels, regular staff consultations, and comprehensive decision-making forums. They contended that these mechanisms would not only promote understanding but also foster trust and support smoother institutional incorporation. Overall, the lack of participation has inflated uncertainty among staff, while concurrently prompting calls for more inclusive and transparent managerial approaches.

Summary of findings

Throughout the four research objectives, the findings show that the academic staff hold primarily guarded perceptions of the intended merger between EIMPA and IDM. Even though some staff members believed the merger would result in potential overall benefits, these views were outshined by the distresses concerning job security, workload implications, [professional identity and cultural alignment. The merger also revealed major communication gaps, where staff reported lack of involvement in the entire decision-making process. Nevertheless, the findings also demonstrated that staff remained willing to contribute to the merger process, as long as they were expressively involved and adequately informed by public service management.

Conclusion

The proposed merger between IDM and EIMPA represents a major reform initiative within the public service landscape of Eswatini. This study demonstrated that while the intention of policy makers may be inspired by institutional strengthening, enhanced governance, and efficient service delivery, the human dimension of the change process is both significant and insufficiently addressed. The perceptions of the academic staff who participated in the study reveal a prevailing sense of uncertainty, concern, and limited confidence in the process, mainly due to lack of communication, lack of institutional direction and the lack of engagement mechanisms.

Academic staff expressed cautious views toward the merger, across the four research objectives of the study. While some recognized probable opportunities such as improved visibility, expanded academic programmes due to access to wider resources, these positive expectations were overshadowed by anxieties with regard to job security, increased workload and the inevitable erosion of EMIPA's long-standing and unique identity as a civil-service-oriented institute. Staff's fears surrounding the merger included fear of the alteration of their professional identity, disruption of the established institutional culture, and the introduction of employment uncertainties, given the differences in the governance and funding models of the two institutions. These fears mirror trends in global literature, highlighting that mergers do often result to complex emotional and professional responses when initiated without structure and alignment to change-management principles.

The study also exposed the universal dissatisfaction with the level of staff engagement in the proposed merger process. Staff reported being excluded from key discussions about the proposed change process, and most learnt about it through informal networks and media sources. This lack of a formal consultation process not only worsened anxieties but also deteriorated trust in the public service system. Literature on organizational change stresses that transparent and participatory communication are vital for securing stakeholder buy-in, reduced resistance, and ensures that transformations are understood and embraced. The absence of these mechanisms in the merger under study presents risks to institutional stability and a threat that weakens academic staff commitment during a critical period of a major reform.

The study concluded that for the proposed merger to be successful and achieve favourable outcomes, the humans involved in this institutional restructuring process must be prioritised. This will involve clear and purposeful communication about the new institutional model, assurance of job security where possible, opportunities for staff contributions to the planning and implementation phases, and deliberate efforts being made to preserve the existing institutional strengths and identities that have shaped EIMPA's contribution to public service delivery. By centring the perspectives and experiences of academic staff, public officials and institutional leaders can better circumnavigate the intricacies of the change and build an amalgamated institution that is credible, sustainable, and responsive to Eswatini's public-sector development needs.

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Conflict of Interest

Author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of the paper or otherwise.

Authors' contributions

The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

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