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(article begins on next page)

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INTERDEPARTMENTAL FUNCTIONAL INTEGRATION AND DECENTRALISATION OF DECISION MAKING IN MERGED COLLEGES OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN FLANDERS, BELGIUM¹

1. Problem and questions

When the Flemish Parliament passed the Law of 13 July 1994 on the colleges of higher education it continued a policy, established in 1989, of decentralisation, deregulation, and increased autonomy of the colleges. This law also assigned the colleges a new mission: "Colleges should, in the interests of society, be simultaneously active in the field of college education, social service provision and, where appropriate, project-based scientific research in collaboration with a university or other body in this country or abroad. The development and practice of the arts will also be the task of the colleges, which will organise courses in the fields of audio-visual and plastic art, music and drama. The provision of college education will be the primary task of the college" (Art. 3 of the Law of 13 July 1994). Until then, colleges did not generally conduct scientific research. By decentralising the decision-making structure, the Flemish government granted the right to colleges to determine their own policy more than previously was the case. In the future, colleges were supposed to determine their own policy in function of the local challenges. The new law abandoned most of the old regulations of the Belgian centralised system prior to 1989. Deregulation was seen as an instrument to give colleges more freedom to determine their own policy. Nevertheless, the state did not leave all policy determination to the colleges, although it did relax the rules in many respects, providing only the framework within which the colleges should act. This means that the government still determines the contours within which colleges have to provide education. This law protects the rights of college policy makers, the staff, and the students of the colleges, by for example, specifying the decision-making and participatory structure of the state colleges and some essential requirements for the non-state colleges, the status of the personnel, the minimum rules to be followed for quality assurance, and a system of control by government commissioners who have to determine whether the colleges act according to the law. It also created a lump-sum funding system to be used by the board of the colleges to attain their objectives. Thus, the colleges acquired more the autonomy. In this respect it was very important for state colleges that the organising authority was no longer the Minister of Education, but the board of directors of the college. The state

¹ This chapter is based on data collected within the framework of a research project financed by OBPWO (Fund for Educational Policy and Practice-oriented Scientific Research, Brussels) as Contract 97.01.

colleges became autonomous, a label that is still being used in their names (Van Heffen et al., 1999: 106-108).

The increase in autonomy was a tremendous innovation for they –more than universities- had always been subject to central regulation. Indeed, many of them started in the beginning of the 20th century as secondary schools and thus were used to the very centralized Belgian education policy system. More self-regulation was not the only innovation though. The Flemish government realised that it was impossible for the 163 mostly small colleges at that time to develop an autonomous policy and included in the law funding principles that made it hard for colleges with less than 2000 students² to survive. This law was passed in the Flemish parliament in July 1994, and the colleges had to look for partners in a period of one year. They were free to choose the partners they wanted. By the start of the 1995-1996 academic year, 29 new colleges has been established, and each of them was given the right to provide education in one or more of the eleven fields of study determined by the government. The fields of study provided by the new colleges were the fields already offered by the old merging colleges. Typical for this merging process was that most of the colleges merged with colleges of the same network, i.e. state colleges merged with state colleges, provincial colleges with other provincial colleges, and independent colleges with independent (see Section 2). This was a consequence of the old “pillarized” educational structure, which was and still is characteristic of the Flemish educational structure. Some of the older colleges were large enough to continue and kept the old composition. Nevertheless, not all of the colleges could or even wanted to merge into new colleges of at least 2000 students. They waited for new opportunities because the law gave them some time to look for other partners. In 1999 - the year we collected the data- most of the colleges had more than 2000 students, but there were still seven colleges with fewer. The merging process is not yet completed. At present (2001), there are 25 colleges, of which five have fewer than 2000 students but in the near future this figure might well decrease (MVG, 2001: 45-46). This merging process was not easy and created many problems: the old colleges disappeared to become departments in a college; old colleges often had to merge with other old colleges that offered the same field of study and became new departments in a new college; directors lost their position and were not sure if they could become department heads of the new departments in the new colleges. Another problem was that the departments in the larger colleges did not share the same campus but were spread over the town and in some cases over several towns. The consequence is that students of the same department of the same college sometimes attend classes on different campuses³. It could be expected that these changes would not be accepted by the staff enthusiastically, and rightly so when we look at the data of a recent survey (February 2001; N = 773 teachers in 12 merged colleges). Verhoeven et al. (2001: 109) stated that 45.7% of the teachers

² The process of merging in Flanders shows a lot of similarities with the merging of colleges in the Netherlands and Australia, with the exception of the abolition of the binary system in Australia (Goedegebuure and Meek, 1991; Goedegebuure, 1992; Van Heffen et al., 1999: 23-24; Gamage, 1993)

³ For a long list of the problems that can emerge during a process of merging, see Coffman, 1996.

were very dissatisfied with the merger, 23.8% dissatisfied; 18.1% claimed no positive or negative attitude towards the merging, 10.5% were satisfied, and only 1.9% were very satisfied.

The new colleges faced a tremendous challenge. First, they had to learn to live with a new policy structure, a new participatory structure, and a new mission. Second, they had to learn to collaborate with their previous competitors, and most of the merged colleges had no experience with processes of merging. State colleges could rely on forms of administration and participation determined by law, but the non-state colleges had to invent themselves new forms of administration. Confronted with the merging, the new administrative structures created integration problems. If they wanted to function as a unity, steps had to be taken to integrate the different new parts of the college and at least attain a certain level of interdepartmental functional integration. At the same time, they had to adapt to a new administrative structure in which staff and students could participate in the decision making, i.e. a level of decentralisation of decision making prescribed by law. To study these processes, the researchers conducted case studies of six new colleges and a survey (January-March 1999) of 808 members of the decision-making and participatory bodies of 16 other new colleges. In this chapter, we will not describe the processes the colleges went through during the merging process but confine the analysis to the interdepartmental functional integration and decentralisation of decision making in colleges of higher education as perceived by three important parties, i.e. the general managers, the heads of the departments, and the representatives of the teachers on the main decision making and advisory boards. This leads us to three questions: Given the mergers,

- 1) To what extent do general managers, heads of departments, and staff (all members of decision making and participatory bodies) experience the functional integration of the different departments in the college?
- 2) Do these policy makers experience decentralisation or centralisation of the administration of the college?
- 3) Is there a relationship between the interdepartmental functional integration of the colleges and the decentralisation of the decision-making procedure in the colleges?

Since the administrative structure and the rights of the actors in state, independent, and provincial colleges differ (see Section 2), we will also consider whether the perception of functional integration and decentralisation is different in each type of college.

Before presenting the theoretical considerations that guided our research and methods, let us first take a look at the legal decision-making structure of the colleges.

2. The legal decision-making structure in colleges

To understand the Belgian educational system, it is important to realize the difference between *state colleges* and *non-state colleges* (i.e. independent and

provincial colleges). Independent colleges are founded by natural or legal persons, whereas the provincial colleges are founded by provincial administrations. Because the Belgian constitution guarantees the freedom of education, the state is not allowed to prescribe the administrative structure of non-state colleges except to guarantee a certain level of participation in policy making. This participation, however, is limited to consultation.

The policy-making structure of *state colleges* is laid down in the law. A state college is governed by a board of directors, consisting of representatives of the different categories of the personnel, elected for 4- years terms by the personnel, representatives of the students, elected for 2 years by the students, and the representatives of organising body and/or the representatives of the socio-economic and cultural sectors (also for a term of 4 years) (Verhoeven and Dom, 2001: 34-36). The general manager, the school head of a college of higher education, has an advisory voice in this council. The board of directors determines the regulations concerning administration, examinations, and discipline, establishes the budget, appoints the personnel, establishes the framework for the organisation and co-ordination of the tasks of the educational institution and so on. The general manager is appointed (and may be dismissed) by the board of directors and is responsible for the administration of the institute. He directs the administrative and other (e.g. international relations officer) staff. He is responsible for the registration of students, their administrative records, as well as the records of each member of his staff. By delegation, he shares responsibility for decisions on the use of funds. Regularly, at least once a year, he informs the organising body (the board of directors) of the school's financial situation and prepares the budget for the coming year. He is also responsible for the school's material situation, for maintenance and repairs, and for the purchase of furnishing and equipment. He plays a central role in selecting new teachers and other staff members to be appointed by the organising body. He is responsible for all external contacts (with the pedagogical support services, the local community, guidance centre, labour market, etc.) and the public relations of the school in general. Although the law does not prescribe the administrative structure of the *non-state colleges*, non-state colleges have a rather similar structure at the top with a board of directors that makes the final decisions and a general manager who manages the everyday affairs of the college.

Each college of higher education, both state and non-state, is divided into departments. For each department in a *state college*, there is a departmental council composed of the same parties as the board of directors (with the same terms but with another proportional composition). This council elects the head of the department, who serves as chairman of the council for a 4-year term. The departmental council is responsible for the establishment of the educational programmes and examinations, the establishment of the research programmes, the use of the funds and personnel, the recruitment of temporary personnel, the nomination of personnel for permanent

appointment, the internal organisation of the department, the annual budget proposals, and other matters. In state colleges, the departmental council can take decisions that are binding for the board of directors. This is not the case in non-state colleges.

Also at *non-state colleges*, a departmental council has to be established for each department consisting of the head of the department (who is appointed by the board of directors) as the chairperson of the council and elected representatives of the teaching staff, the students, and the socio-economic and cultural sectors. This council has the right to information on all matters concerning the department and may advise on the departmental level when asked by the board of directors of the college or on its own initiative on a range of matters concerning the department.

While all these councils and actors have decision-making power except for the departmental council of non-state-colleges, all the following councils have only an advisory function and will not be included in the analysis of Section 5.

For the non-state colleges of higher education, the law provides administrative bodies with mainly advisory tasks as regards the board of directors of the college, such as the academic council. The board of directors of the college must inform the academic council about all matters concerning the educational institution. The academic council consists of elected representatives of the board of directors of the college (4 years), the personnel (4 years), and the students (2 years). This council is entitled to receive information and to advise at least on the educational aspects concerning certain matters (such as the research policy). Third, the academic council has the 'competence of consultation' for at least the educational aspects of certain matters such as the financial policy, the education and examinations policies, and the organisation of study guidance. If there is no consensus, the board of directors of the college decides.

Besides these bodies, each college of higher education must also establish a council of students, consisting of at least 8 and at most 16 elected students. The board of directors (at state and non-state colleges) must consult the council of students beforehand on all matters that are directly relevant to the students (e.g. regulations concerning education and examinations, and the evaluation of the teaching staff). The council of students may also take advisory initiatives.

Concerning the conditions of employment, each college of higher education and each department of that institute has a negotiation committee to regulate the relations between the employer and the unions of the personnel. The negotiation

committee of the college consists of the representatives of the board of directors and of the personnel. At state colleges of higher education, the departmental negotiation committee consists of representatives of the department council and of the personnel. At non-state colleges of higher education, it consists of the representatives of the board of directors of the department and of the personnel.

3. Changing organisations in a changing society

The process of merging and scaling-up of colleges in Flanders can be situated within a process of change from an industrial society to a service society. In this society, more attention is paid to consumption than to production. Instead of producing many similar products, production units want to offer a great diversity of products to meet the demands of the consumers. Knowledge about the expectations of the consumers comes first, and production is adapted to these changing markets. More than ever, we are living in a knowledge and information society. This development has rendered the old bureaucracies obsolete, and organisation has to be approached differently. Theories on the development of the organisational culture, the learning organisation, the network organisation, knowledge management, third-generation management and post-modernism (Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Schein, 1992; Senge, 1990; Clegg, 1990; Whitaker, 1992; Gergen, 1992; Turner, 1992; Reed and Hughes, 1992; Bartlett and Goshal, 1994; Hamel and Prahalad, 1994; Miles and Snow, 1994) stress the importance of strong involvement of employees who take initiatives in the organisation in order to deal with the problems of a rapidly changing society. Burns and Stalker (1961) saw the answer to these problems in an organic type of organisation that relies more on common values and goals than on a hierarchy. Tasks are divided over the organisation and linked with the total task of the organisation. On the basis of frequent and regular communication between management and collaborators, these tasks can be adapted to the needs of the moment. This type of management should be more fit for organisations working under conditions of change (Burns and Stalker, 1961: 121). Burns and Stalker (1961: 119) also describe the mechanical type of organisation (with the opposite characteristics of the organic type), a type that is more appropriate for organisations working under relatively stable conditions. The contingency theory stresses the same development, and Lawrence and Lorsch (1967: 156-158, 187-189) note that they come to the same conclusions as Burns and Stalker. Effective organisations have to pay attention to the diversity and the uncertainty of the environment of the organisation. Bureaucratic and mechanical ways of organisation are no longer adapted to the rapid changes of the different parts of our society. To understand the development of an organisation, researchers should pay attention to the contingent factors of the organisation and the environment of the organisation. The challenge for large organisations is that, on the one hand, they have to adapt to the changing society by relying on responsible and competent employees. This is the basis for the creation of smaller, rather autonomous units. On the other hand, the scaling-up of the organisation demands rational planned change in order to control the organisation and keep it manageable. In other words, some developments push

organisations to a more flexible or organic structure, others to a more bureaucratic or mechanical structure.

The colleges could not escape this societal development, so both sides of organisational development have emerged in the colleges. Hanson (1978) refers to two domains in schools: a management domain and a teaching domain. The management domain is mainly bureaucratically organised, while the teaching domain has an organic structure. Such a mixed structure is typical of what Mintzberg (1979: 366-371) has called a professional bureaucracy. A professional bureaucracy survives more easily in a relatively stable environment. Colleges show the same characteristics, which would imply that they would find it difficult to follow trends of a changing society. *The increase of autonomy and deregulation for colleges could mean that they have to move to an organic structure with less centralisation of decision making.* The growth of the importance of the consumers (parents and students) also demands more flexibility in the decision making and in the participation of the stakeholders. In contrast to this development, however, the scaling-up of the colleges tends to separate management and implementation (Giesbers, 1993: 13-16; Hofman, 1991: 12-15). *Scaling-up implies more centralisation. Colleges that merge and became larger would be likely to create the structures to realise the college policy, which might contribute to centralisation and formalization.* Taken together, these contrasting trends seem to indicate that the newly merged colleges would have to look for a road between centralisation and decentralisation to attain their goals. Mary Henkel (2000) and Burton Clark (1998) following P. Hoggett call this development 'centralised decentralisation', and Barbara Sporn (1999) speaks of shared governance.

Besides centralisation of the decision making, Miller and Dröge (1986: 543; 559-560) consider functional integration, i. e. the use of committees, consultation, and relations between 'integrative personnel', as an important structural factor in the understanding of an organisation. Since the environment of organisations is more uncertain, they assume that the administrative tasks will become 'more complex and non-routine'. In order to solve this problem organisations need 'more intensive face-to-face liaison devices to promote collaboration and resolve differences ..., and more power delegated to lower-level managers' (Miller and Dröge, 1986: 545). Merged colleges are facing a changing and more competitive society in which they have to find a place and must make a new, large college out of many old, small colleges. In line with these reflections, functional integration in this chapter will be seen as the steps taken by the college and the departments to promote collaboration between the departments (see Section 4)

To study centralisation, we examine the process of decision making and the delegation of decision making in the colleges. This means that we look not only at the moment of decision making but also at the preparatory steps (Bazerman, 1994: 4; Drummond, 1991: 20). Theoretically, five steps are important in this process: the collection of information, the preparatory phase, the decision making, the

implementation, and the evaluation of the implementation. This is a continuing process that creates new problems and pushes the policy makers to new decisions. This theoretical model is often criticised because of its ideal rational character. Indeed, reality is not particularly rational. Individual opinions and interests thwart this model. Nevertheless, we used it as an heuristic device to construct an instrument to observe the decision-making processes. Because of the limits of a written questionnaire, we confined the analysis to three steps: the decision making by the different councils and actors, the influence of different councils and actors on the decisions taken by the responsible actors, and the evaluation of the implementation by the different actors.

4. Methods of research

It was our purpose to chart functioning of the policy making and participatory bodies of the colleges three to four years after the merging of the colleges. Two methods of research were used. Since each process of organisational change is to some extent typical for each organisation we applied the case study method in six colleges, one state, and five non-state (four independent, and one provincial). In each college, ten participants of the policy and participatory councils were interviewed in depth (May-November 1998), and publications of each college were used to get a picture of the results of the merging process on the level of the administration and participation. We will refer very briefly to some of the results of this part of the research.

We also wanted to construct a representative picture of the merging process as far as administration of colleges and the functioning of participatory councils were concerned. Therefore we drew a sample of 1,282 members of the different councils in 16 colleges (other than the six mentioned above). To determine the diversity of the departments in the different colleges we selected at random 28 departments from 10 (out of 20) independent colleges, 20 departments from 4 (out of 5) state colleges, and 5 departments of 2 (out of 3) provincial colleges. In each department, members (head, staff, students) of the different councils were selected, together with all members of the board of directors, the general manager, and some members of the councils on the college level. We mailed these persons a questionnaire, which was sent three times, if necessary. 63% of the selected persons responded, but the proportion of responses varied considerably between the colleges (between 47% and 73%). Because one person could be a member of more than one council, the information provided could concern more than just one council.

The main themes of the questionnaire were the interdepartmental functional integration, and the decentralisation of the financial, educational and human-resource policy. The questionnaire included other important themes such as the functioning of the policy making and participatory councils (including the informal councils), the participation in the councils, the standardisation of administrative and policy procedures, the style of leadership of the general manager and the head

of the department, the communication with colleagues, and the communication between the negotiation committee of the college and the departmental negotiation committee. For this chapter, we rely mainly on the questions related to interdepartmental functional integration and centralisation.

We defined interdepartmental functional integration as the degree to which departments of the same college have frequent and regular contact and strive collectively to achieve common goals. Interdepartmental functional integration is defined as "integration through the use of liaison devices such as task forces, committees, and integrative personnel" (Miller and Dröge, 1986: 543) that build bridges between the different departments of the same (merged) college. The respondents could describe this phenomenon by answering 12 items (see Appendix 1) applying 5 answer categories (I strongly disagree, I disagree, neutral, I agree, I strongly agree) (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$).

Centralisation in colleges was defined as the degree to which decisions in colleges are made at the top (the level of the general manager). Decentralisation is, then, the degree that decisions are made by heads of the departments and/or the departmental councils.

The decision-making processes were analyzed in three phases: 1) the phase of preparing decisions; 2) the phase of influencing the decision-making processes; and 3) the phase of monitoring the decisions.

We distinguished three domains of decision-making: 1) finance and equipment; 2) educational policy; and 3) human-resource management. For each domain we provided different fields of decision-making, and we asked the respondents to indicate whether the general manager, the heads of the departments, the departmental councils or other councils or actors were the most important decision makers.

As far as finance and equipment are concerned, 4 items were presented, i.e. decisions about the annual budget of the college, the distribution of the budget between the departments of the college, the annual departmental budget, and investment in infrastructure (max. score = 4). The items concerning educational policy were the following: general regulation of education of the college, departmental regulation of education, regulation of the examinations, course supply of the college, course supply of the department, curriculum innovation, and quality assurance (max. score = 7). Human resource management was indexed on the basis of decision making concerning personnel planning, vacancies, career planning, staff assessment, staff recruitment, and work load (max. score = 6). Cronbach's α 's for the different domains are between .67 and .92.

Because we are interested in the general perception of interdepartmental functional integration and centralisation by the most important role players of the colleges, we

confine our analysis to the opinion of the general manager, the heads of the departments, and the staff (N = 401 of 14 merged colleges). Two colleges were not included in the analysis because these colleges had not merged. Moreover, it should be noted that some respondents did not answer all the questions.

5. Analysis

We will answer the three questions raised at the beginning of this paper. First, we will describe the interdepartmental functional integration of the merged colleges as experienced by general managers, heads of departments and staff. Second, we take a look at the different levels of centralisation attained for each domain of decision making as perceived by the same three categories of actors. Third, we consider the relationship between the perceived level of interdepartmental functional integration and the perceived level of centralisation.

Before answering these questions, we want to stress that the respondents were moderately positive about the functioning of the different councils. Most of the councils (board of directors, the academic council, the departmental council, the council of students, and the departmental council of students) scored between 3.11 and 3.68 (max. score 5). This was different for the negotiation committees: the negotiation committee of the college and the departmental negotiation committee scored respectively 2.99 and 2.85, which is less than the theoretical mean of 3. More than 40% of the participants of these negotiation committees were disappointed about the functioning of these committees.

5.1. Interdepartmental functional integration

Since the colleges merged only four years ago, and since the process was not complete at the time of the research, it could be expected that the interdepartmental functional integration would not be very high⁴. The mean score of interdepartmental functional integration was 34.16 (standard deviation: 9.24) on a scale of 60. A little less than 35% of the respondents attained a score of 30 or less, 39% had a score of 31-40, and the rest had a score higher than 40 (but not higher than 54). The first group (score 30 or less) sees their college as low functionally integrated, the second (score 31-40) could be called the 'middle' category, and the third group (score > 40) experience the interdepartmental functional integration as high.

A very common phenomenon in organisations is that the leaders of organisations have a more positive opinion about co-operation in organisations than do the other members of the organisation. This is also here the case: general managers and heads of departments saw the colleges more functionally integrated than did the staff ($\chi^2 = 54.93$; $df = 4$; $p < .0001$), although all the latter were members of decision-making

⁴ Goedegebuure (1992: 75) states '...it takes some ten years for the wounds to heal and the new organization to operate in a more or less normalized way'.

or participatory bodies and could consequently have a good overview of the college policy. The mean score of the general managers ($M = 44.09$) and the department heads ($M = 42.56$) mean scores for interdepartmental functional integration do not differ significantly from each other but both do differ significantly from the score of the staff ($M = 32.86$) ($F(2, 398) = 30.77$; $p < .0001$). In spite of these differences, we decided to combine the answers of the general managers, the department heads, and the staff to have a common indicator of interdepartmental functional integration.

Table 1. Interdepartmental functional integration of the colleges according to the position

Integration	General manager		Head of department		Staff		Total
	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Low	0	0	2	4.9	137	39.3	139
Middle	6	54.5	16	39.0	163	46.7	185
High	5	45.5	23	56.1	49	14.0	77
Total	11	100	41	100	349	100	401

Since the legal structure of independent, state, and provincial colleges differs, it could also be expected that the level of interdepartmental functional integration would differ. Independent and provincial colleges had to determine their own organisational structure, whereas the structure of the state colleges was determined by law. Members of provincial ($M = 37.43$) and independent ($M = 34.63$) colleges consider their colleges more functionally integrated than members of state colleges ($M = 32.19$), and the members of the provincial colleges experience a little more interdepartmental functional integration than do those of the independent colleges ($F(2, 398) = 6.27$; $p = .002$).

Also the number of students in a college affects the interdepartmental functional integration ($F(2,398) = 6.29$; $p = .002$): the smaller the college, the higher the functional integration of the college. Colleges with many campuses in several towns are less integrated than colleges with only a few campuses in a few towns ($F(3,397) = 6.28$; $p = .004$). If colleges offer fewer than 5 fields of study they score higher on functional integration than if they offer 6 or more fields of study ($F(1,399) = 13.65$; $p = .0003$). Finally, there is a significant difference between the levels of interdepartmental functional integration of individual colleges (scores between 2.34 and 3.31). All these relationships remain significant when they are checked for the function of the respondent. We can conclude that the complexity⁵ of the structure of a college contributes to less interdepartmental functional integration.

⁵ The structure of a college is considered complex when the college has many campuses and provides many fields of study. The more campuses, and the more fields of study a college has, the more complex is the structure.

5.2. Centralisation

Instead of using only one general indicator of centralisation, we used nine: one for each level of decision making (making proposals, influence, and follow up of the decisions) combined with each of the three domains of decision making (finance and equipment, educational policy, and human-resource management). In the following tables, we present the levels of centralisation for these three domains. As defined above, we call centralisation the degree to which decisions in colleges are made at the level of the general manager. If decisions are made by heads of the departments or the departmental councils, we call it decentralisation.

Table 2 shows that the decision making concerning *finance and equipment* in colleges is more in the hands of the general managers of the college than of the two other parties. General managers make significantly more proposals, have a stronger influence, and monitor more the decisions than do the other actors. They are more involved in finance and equipment policy than the heads of the departments or the department councils, while the heads of the departments in turn are more involved than the department councils.

Decision making concerning finance and equipment in colleges seems to be rather centralized, although the large standard deviations suggest that this opinion is not shared by all the respondents. Moreover, the rather low scores granted to the general manager for preparing, influencing, and monitoring financial policy indicate that he or she is not seen as the main decision maker. Indeed, in **state colleges** the main role players in decision making and influence in the area of the financial policy are the boards of directors and the directorates⁶. On the other hand the follow-up of the decisions is mainly seen as the task of the general manager (although a score of 1.73 on 4 is still low; this score is higher than 1.22 of the department heads and 1.13 of the departmental councils). But since the department heads and the departmental council also play a role in this field of policy the decision-making structure is partly centralized and partly decentralized. It is important to note that the departmental council in state schools plays a more prominent role in financial policy than it does in independent and provincial colleges. Indeed, according to the law departmental councils in state colleges have the right to decide, which is not the case in the two other types of colleges.

In the **independent colleges** we see that the same main role is played by the board of directors, and, to a lesser degree than the general manager by the representative administrator⁷. In these colleges, the influence of the department heads (between score 1.91 and 2.49 on 4 for the three decision-making levels) is assessed almost as highly as that of the general manager (between score 2.17 and 2.76 on 4). Therefore, we can also speak of centralisation and decentralisation but for another reason than

⁶ The Directorate consists of the chairman of the board of directors, the general manager, and 3 representatives of the personnel.

⁷ This function exists only in independent colleges.

in the state colleges. The fact that heads of the department have such an important position in relation to decision making in independent colleges is a relic of the old structure. Many former directors of the small, old colleges were appointed heads of department in the new merged colleges.

In the **provincial colleges**, the main responsibility is shared by both the general manager (between score 1.86 and 2.25 on 4) and the member of the provincial government responsible for education⁸. The provincial government does not involve itself very much in college policy. Since departmental councils (between score 0.22 and 0.51 on 4) and the department heads (between score 0.78 and 1.29 on 4) have little influence we can call the decision-making structure of the provincial colleges centralized as regards financial policy. In both the independent and the provincial colleges, the influence of the departmental council on financial matters is very weak (Devos et al., 2001: 220-224).

Table 2. Decision-making about finances and equipment by the general manager, the head of department, and departmental council (means and std) (max. score = 4)

Phase of decision making	Average value (8)	Significant differences	Standard deviation
General manager prepares	1.86	A	1.58
Dep. head prepares	1.56	B	1.37
Departmental council prepares	0.59	C	0.99
General manager influences	2.32	A'	1.55
Dep. head influences	1.85	B'	1.52
Departmental council influences	0.45	C'	0.83
General manager monitors	2.18	A''	1.62
Dep. head monitors	1.78	B''	1.53
Dep. council monitors	0.62	C''	1.06

(1) two sample paired t-test for means ($p < .01$). Different symbols in the same level of decision making give significant differences.

In comparison with the financial policy, *the educational policy* is more decentralized. Although educational policy needs the approval of the board of directors, and the general manager is supposed to monitor these decisions, the departments have kept their responsibilities in educational matters even after the mergers. Mainly, it is the heads of the departments who take initiatives, influence the decisions, and control the execution of the decisions. Although less powerful in the three phases (proposal of policy, influence, and monitoring) of educational

⁸ This function exists only in provincial colleges.

policy, departmental councils act the same way as the department heads, and clearly have a more important role than the general managers, except as far as the monitoring of the educational policy is concerned ($p = .52$). However, the large standard deviations suggest that opinions are very diverse, and the reason for this lies in the differences between the legal structures of the colleges.

The state colleges are the most decentralized. For the three phases of decision making the departmental councils attain the highest scores (between 3.46 and 4.02 on 7) though some scores barely reach the mean score. Department heads have almost the same influence in this field as do the councils (between score 3.58 and 4.01 on 7 for the three phases of decision making). The general manager plays a minor role (between score 1.33 and 1.61 on 7).

In the **independent colleges**, the main actor is the head of the department (between score 4.83 and 5.31 on 7 for the three decision-making phases). This means that the former directors of the old colleges kept the same position as before the mergers as far as educational policy is concerned. The departmental council and the general manager have a minor position in this respect. Councils interfere rather weakly (between score 2.25 and 2.86 on 7) and so do the general managers (between score 2.24 and 2.88 on 7). In these colleges, the department heads have the same role as before the mergers.

The provincial colleges rate the three parties almost equally. Department heads score higher than the others (between score 3.71 and 4.6 on 7 for the three decision-making phases), but the general manager (between score 3.07 and 3.91 on 7) and the council (between score 2.71 and 3.66 on 7) take part determining educational policy, although less than does the department head.

Nonetheless, we should not forget that the board of directors in state and independent colleges has an important influence in matters of educational programs, because it is the board of directors that accepts programs. The board of directors does not take the lead according to the respondents, but can decide to accept or not new proposals within the framework granted by law (a college may only offer authorized courses). In spite of this, it is correct to say that educational policy is decentralized in state and independent colleges, albeit for different reasons. In the state colleges, the departmental councils are seen as having the most influence, while in the independent colleges, the department heads have. In the provincial colleges, educational policy is not clearly centralized or decentralized. Indeed, the main actors are here the head of the department and the general manager. The representative of the provincial government plays a minor role in educational policy (Devos et al. 2001: 224-227).

Table 3. Decision making about educational policy by general manager, head of department, and departmental council (means and std) (max. score = 7)

Phases of decision making	Average value (8)	Significant differences (1)	Standard deviation
General manager prepares	2.06	A	2.04
Dep. head prepares	4.41	B	2.22
Dep. council prepares	3.25	C	2.25
General manager influences	2.50	A'	2.22
Dep. head influences	4.61	B'	2.47
Dep. council influences	3.11	C'	2.36
General manager monitors	2.53	A''	2.32
Dep. head monitors	4.74	B''	2.43
Dep. council monitors	2.70	A''	2.46

(1) two sample paired t-test for means ($p < .01$). Different symbols in the same level of decision making give significant differences.

Human-resource management is also more decentralized than financial management. In spite of the rather low scores, the department heads are seen as the most important decision makers in human-resource management, more than the departmental councils or the general managers. The departmental councils seem to have a minor position in this respect, less than that of the general managers. The large standard deviations show a great range of opinion.

The reason for this diversity can be found when we analyze the decision-making structure of the state, independent, and provincial colleges separately. In the **state colleges**, the departmental council has decision-making power, which means that this council (score = 3.19 on 6) plays almost the same important role in preparing the human-resource policy as do the department heads (score = 3.36 on 6). The influence and the monitoring of the human-resource policy is more the responsibility of the department heads (respectively score 3.60 and 3.85) than of the departmental councils (respectively score 2.75 and 2.69). We may call this policy decentralized.

This is not the case in the **independent colleges**. Here the main actor is the department head (preparing score = 4.37; influence score = 4.88; follow-up score = 4.49), who is strongly supported (or guided) by the general manager (preparing score = 3.12; influence score = 3.1; follow-up score = 3.02). The departmental council (only advisory authority) plays a very minor role or no role at all (preparing score = 0.54; influence score = 0.59; follow-up score = 0.55). In the independent colleges, the department heads (often the former directors of the old colleges) have kept their power in this respect. This is a form of decentralisation that leaves the power in the hands of two persons, i.e. the department head and the general manager.

The **provincial colleges** occupy a middle position. The respondents think that the general manager takes the lead in human-resource policy and is supported in this by the department head, but, while the general manager takes the lead in human-resource policy (preparing score = 4.48; influence score = 4.37; follow-up score = 3.96), he seems to rely on the heads of the departments (preparing score = 2.32; influence score = 2.37; follow-up score = 3.7) in many respects. Again we can speak here of a partly centralized and a partly decentralized decision making structure (Devos et al. 2001: 233-236).

Table 4. Decision-making about human resources by the general manager, the head of department, and the departmental council (means and std) (max. score = 6)

Phases of decision making	Average value (8)	Significant differences (1)	Standard deviation
General manager prepares	2.74	A	2.38
Dep. head prepares	3.85	B	2.21
Dep. council prepares	1.38	C	2.05
General manager influences	2.73	A'	2.42
Dep. head influences	4.30	B'	2.25
Dep. council influences	1.22	C'	2.00
General manager monitors	2.62	A''	2.50
Dep. head monitors	4.21	B''	2.35
Dep. council monitors	1.21	C''	2.05

(1) two sample paired t-test for means ($p < .01$). Different symbols in the same level of decision making give significant differences.

5.3. Interdepartmental functional integration and decentralisation

The founding of new colleges has different consequences as far as interdepartmental functional integration and decentralisation are concerned. Because general managers are facing the challenge to bring the college to act as a unity, they might tend to put the decision-making power more in the hands of the central administration. However, by boosting the interdepartmental functional integration process, they might offer more opportunities for a decentralized decision-making structure. Therefore, we hypothesized that a higher level of decentralisation would be related to a higher level of interdepartmental functional integration. According to the theory of Burns and Stalker a modern organisation would function better as an organic type if the organisation is working under conditions of change. As noted in the beginning of this chapter, the merging of the colleges was a tremendous change for them, at a time when important changes were occurring in the society (e.g. law, economy). Therefore, an organic type of organisation in the colleges could be

expected, with the interdepartmental functional integration and decentralisation being linked to each other.

Table 5. Correlations (Spearman) between the different phases and domains of centralisation and interdepartmental functional integration

	Finance	Education	Human resources
General manager prepares	.133**	.105	.194**
Dep. head prepares	.146*	.094	-.009
Dep. council prepares	-.051	.117*	-.093
General manager influences	.077	.190**	.232***
Dep. head influences	.106	.063	.027
Dep. council influences	.041	.165**	.088
General manager monitors	.133*	.193*	.230***
Dep. head monitors	.160**	.110	-.008
Dep. council monitors	-.003	.017	-.089

*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Since decentralisation is very different depending on the domain of decision making, we tested the former hypothesis for each level and domain of decision making. Because the legal rights of the department heads and the departmental councils (see above) differ in state, independent, and provincial colleges, we controlled for the function of the respondents and the legal position of the colleges.

5.3.1. Decentralisation of finance policy and interdepartmental functional integration

The hypothesis that decentralisation in decision making about financial matters is linked to an increase in interdepartmental functional integration is not supported. This could be expected on the basis of the data on centralisation, because we can only speak about decentralisation in provincial colleges. In the state and independent colleges there is a mixture of centralisation and decentralisation.

Using correlation analysis (Spearman), we found a positive significant relationship only between interdepartmental functional integration and the act of making proposals in financial matters by the department head ($r = .146$) and the general manager ($r = .133$), and the monitoring of the decisions by the department head ($r = .16$) and the general manager ($r = .133$). As described before, the general manager and the department head are the most important decision makers (see Table 2). Although these relations are not strong, they do show that the opinion about interdepartmental functional integration is linked to the opinion about the behaviour of two important actors in financial matters, i.e. the general manager who tends more to centralisation and the department heads who tend more to decentralisation.

We checked these relations for each type of college. In the **independent colleges**, we found a positive relation between interdepartmental functional integration and centralisation, i.e. interdepartmental functional integration increases together with

the increase of the frequency of mentioning the general manager as the main actor in preparing ($r = .168$) and monitoring ($r = .166$) the financial policy. Interdepartmental functional integration in independent colleges was not linked with the perception of the head of the department as an important actor in preparing and monitoring the financial policy. This is the opposite in the **state colleges**: here interdepartmental functional integration increases when the heads of departments play an important role in preparing ($r = .211$) and monitoring ($r = .272$) the financial policy but not when the respondents mention the general manager as an important actor. In the **provincial colleges**, there is no relation at all between interdepartmental functional integration and centralisation.

It is also important to note that the assessment of the influence of general manager, the department head, and the departmental council on financial policy is not linked with the feeling of interdepartmental functional integration of the members of the merged colleges.

5.3.2. Decentralisation of educational policy and interdepartmental functional integration

Financial policy is more decentralized than educational policy. This means that the responsibility for the educational policy is more in the hands of the department heads and/or the departmental councils. This was the case in the three types of colleges, although in provincial colleges we find more a mixed form of centralisation and decentralisation (see Table 3). When respondents saw more action in educational matters coming from the department heads and the departmental councils, we expected that they also would experience a higher degree of interdepartmental functional integration. Here again, the data do not confirm this hypothesis (see Table 5).

If the heads of departments are reported to prepare, influence and monitor the educational policy, interdepartmental functional integration of the college is not considered to be higher than when this is not the case. A higher activity level of the departmental councils could also contribute to a higher feeling of interdepartmental functional integration. Two positive relations confirm this hypothesis: if the council is active in preparing ($r = .117$) and influencing ($r = .165$) the educational policy, the perception of interdepartmental functional integration of the college is higher. Nevertheless, variance analysis refuses these relationships ($F(2,307) = 2.12$, $p = .122$; $F(2,284) = 2.80$, $p = .063$). Controlling for the type of the colleges, it became clear that only in independent colleges is the relationship between preparing the educational policy by the departmental council and interdepartmental functional integration significant ($r = .158$).

Interdepartmental functional integration of the college seems to be supported by centralisation of the educational policy (see Table 5). If the general manager influences ($r = .189$) and monitors ($r = .193$) the educational policy according to the

respondents, they assess the interdepartmental functional integration higher. This is not the case if the general manager is very active in preparing the educational policy. Variance analysis shows that this relationship is still present when we control for the type of college: when the general manager influences the educational policy ($F(2,282) = 8.58$; $p = .0002$) and when he monitors it ($F(2,274) = 3.33$; $p = .037$).

5.3.3. Decentralisation and human resource policy

Once again our data do not support the link between decentralisation of the human-resource policy and the interdepartmental functional integration of the colleges (Table 5). When the respondents think that the department head and the departmental council play a role in human-resource management on the different levels, they do not experience more interdepartmental functional integration than do the others. On the contrary. If they think that the general manager prepares the policy ($r = .19$), influences the policy ($r = .23$), or monitors the policy ($r = .23$), they see more interdepartmental functional integration of the college. Variance analysis shows that, after control for type of college, these statements stand for preparing the human-resource policy by the general manager ($F(2,240) = 3.86$; $p = .022$) and for monitoring this policy ($F(2,221) = 7.42$; $p = .0009$). The more centralized the human-resource policy, the more the college is seen as functionally integrated.

6. Discussion and conclusion

The merging of 163 colleges into 29 colleges was a tremendous challenge for the new general managers and the board of directors, but also for the lower policy makers and the members of other college councils. Most of these colleges were totally new constructions. The general managers and boards of directors were assigned a task that did not exist until then, and directors of old colleges lost their job. Some of the latter became heads of a department in a new college, others had to be elected or to leave, depending on the legal character of the college. In the state colleges, department heads have to be elected, while in the independent colleges they are appointed by the board of directors. Very often, an director of a former independent college became the head of a department in a new independent college.

Although the colleges were a new construction, they did not have to start from scratch. The government had determined the decision-making lines and participatory councils for the state colleges. The other colleges had more freedom to establish a decision-making structure, albeit one that was bound by official regulations. For example the independent and the provincial colleges had to establish councils on the level of the department and give the opportunity for the staff and students to participate in deliberations, although the college administration is not bound to agree with their advice. Thus, a departmental council in the state colleges can decide, but the same council in the independent and the provincial colleges can only advise.

In general, we can say that the new decision-making structure of both the state and the non-state colleges grants in principle the possibility of developing a decentralised organisation. This means that they have the basic structure for deliberation among the different members (general manager, department head, staff, students, members of the board, etc.) of the organisation, which can contribute to the establishment of common values and goals by the members and not exclusively by the hierarchy (Burns and Stalker, 1961). On the other hand, they had to be forged into units to fulfil their mission as a college. The task of the general manager and of the department heads is not easy in this respect. If the general manager gives more freedom to the subdivisions (departments), it is possible that he or she will have more difficulty in bringing the college to real unity. However, if the departments have the feeling that their advice is taken seriously, it might contribute to the interdepartmental functional integration of the college as well. This was the problem general managers and boards had to face. How is it being solved?

Obviously policy makers have to follow the rules laid down by law or regulations. This means that all official acts of the colleges are done by the general manager and/or the board of directors. However, other members of the colleges could legally contribute to the process of decision making, this not being restricted to two main actors of a college. What Coffman (1996: 131) saw as an advantage of the merging process in his case study, could also be expected in Flemish colleges. However, our data show that the answer is more complex. The decentralisation of decision making in all domains is not evident. *Finance and equipment policy* is seen to be mainly the domain of the top of the college and partly of the department heads. The departmental councils play only a minor role here. The trend to centralise the finance and equipment policy was also present in six of the ten case studies. However, there were two cases that were strongly decentralized. *Educational policy* is different. Here decentralisation is the main trend in the state and the independent colleges. In the provincial colleges, the respondents perceive a mixed form of centralisation and decentralisation. The data of the cases confirm this pattern. Education seems to be the prerogative of the departments. What is interesting here is that the departmental councils also play a role, albeit one that is less than that of the department heads. *Human-resource policy* is also perceived as decentralised in the state and the independent colleges, while in the provincial colleges it is mixed. However, this decentralisation differs from the decentralisation of educational policy. Human-resource policy is mainly the domain of the department head with the departmental councils playing only a minor role. The colleges have reached a certain level of what P. Hoggett called a 'centralised decentralisation' (Henkel, 2000: 57), but not the same extent for all domains of decision making.

Our hypothesis was that, with account taken of the development of organisations in our society into learning or network organisations, which implies a more organic pattern of organisation, interdepartmental functional integration of the colleges could be related to decentralisation of the decision-making procedure. When more participation in governance is granted to all members of the college, one could

expect that a new more, integrated college would emerge. Before discussing this relationship, we note that the interdepartmental functional integration of the colleges according to our respondents was not very high (score 34.16 on 60), although it was considered remarkably higher by the general managers and the department heads. Even with such a rather low interdepartmental functional integration score, it was still reasonable to expect that interdepartmental functional integration would be supported by decentralisation (Clark, 1998: 137; Henkel, 2000: 57; Sporn, 1999: 284). The assumption is that a college as determined by law, is indeed a democratic organisation with the right of representative participation in the decision making for all staff and students. In spite of this, our hypothesis was refused by the data. When we look at the relationships in Table 5 we see that 7 out of 9 possible relations support the thesis that interdepartmental functional integration of the college is perceived to be related with centralisation: the more the general manager is involved in the decision making, the more functionally integrated the colleges are. The department head and the departmental council do not seem to have the same influence: if the department head is seen as the main decision maker only two relations are significantly linked with the interdepartmental functional integration of the college (Table 5). The latter was also the case when the departmental council is seen as the main actor (decentralisation). Only 4 out of 18 possible relations support the hypothesis that interdepartmental functional integration of the colleges is linked with decentralisation. Decentralisation seems not so much to contribute to interdepartmental functional integration as centralisation does. This could be a consequence of the answers of the general managers and the department heads who may want to attribute themselves more influence than they actually have. We checked this hypothesis, but it was rejected by the data.

How can this relationship be explained? We conjecture that we have to place these statements within the context of the innovation process. General managers and boards of directors were facing an amalgam of departments that were used to living their own lives. The problem for them was to unite these many old colleges. It is obvious that this could be a reason for the managers to play their integrative role more explicitly. This has consequences on the perception of the decision-making processes among the members of the colleges. Because of this, centralisation is assigned a more prominent place in the opinion of the actors. In the meantime, department heads and departmental councils do play a role in the decision-making process in the colleges and thus support decentralisation, but these acts could not be linked with interdepartmental functional integration. This does not mean that decentralisation hindered interdepartmental functional integration, but that decentralisation did not go together with interdepartmental functional integration. Given the formal decision-making structure of the colleges, we expect that, a development to more decentralisation might emerge and vice versa once the colleges are more functionally integrated.

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Appendix 1

- in the college the members of the different departmental councils deliberate informally;
- the different departments are on good terms with each other;
- in the college, some people take care of the co-ordination of the quality assurance between different departments;
- before deciding, the department heads of the different departments deliberate together;
- the central administration is on good terms with the departments;
- in this college, departments exchange staff;
- each department decides more or less independently;
- the decision making at the top of the college is influenced by engagements on the interdepartmental level;
- the college organises meetings (e.g. the beginning of the academic year, receptions) for all the staff of the different departments;
- when the departments have to plan the staff for the coming academic year, they consult each other;
- departments collaborate (informally) to reach a collective decision for the whole college;
- the college organises information meetings for all the employees of all the departments.