

# Costly Amalgamations: The University Merger Mania

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*Never trust the musings of university management, with their uplifting visions of sunlit glory, their honey-laced promises of healthy workplaces, staff and students. Being several steps removed from the trench, the field, the library, they are the last to be asked about anything of any consequence in the fields of teaching and research. But that never stops these servitors of the bottom line from imposing, dictating and ruining things for others actually keen on the pedagogical craft and acquiring knowledge.*

When such musings are paired with those of politicians, an unhealthy compact emerges. In South Australia, the government and two universities have decided that a merger will go ahead. The land, in this regard, is a trodden one. Merger talks between South Australia's universities [have already failed twice](#) – in 2012 and 2018.

For some reason or rather, the current Labor Premier Peter Malinauskas, when in opposition, resurrected the beast stillborn, [proposing](#) a University Merger Commission as part of his electoral platform. The policy said little about the value of teaching, focusing instead on one primary obsession: university rankings. Such a merger was needed to ensure that a South Australian university would cling to a top 100 placement in the rankings "in order to ensure the highest quality research is funded in this state to drive economic growth."

Whatever the merits of university rankings – and they are to be taken as sleights of hand and conjurer's tricks – such an assessment has been incorrect from the outset. In 2023, the University of Adelaide found itself at 88 in the Times Higher Education world university rankings.

To all this could also be added an important caveat. "Should the Independent Commission

determine that a university merger is in the interests of the South Australian economy and the welfare of the people of the State, then a merger will be the first term priority for a Labor Government”.

On winning the state elections last year, Malinauskas immediately threw money at the merger project, [allocating](#) A\$1 million and three full-time staff in the state budget to advise the government on the project’s feasibility. But the promise of a University Merger Commission was abandoned with almost contemptuous casualness. The Premier had already determined what was best for the state, and he would be etched in its history.

On December 7, 2022, the state government announced that a “statement of cooperation” with the University of Adelaide and UniSA had been signed. Both universities revealed that, in the event that a deal could be reached, the new behemoth would be called Adelaide University, and assume work in January 2026.

At the time, jaw dropping declarations were made by the vice-chancellors that “net job losses” would not arise. It was an astonishing thing to say, an opinion of either blind wishful thinking or bog-standard mendacity. True to form, it took a mere few months to abandon the promise regarding job security. In its place is a watered down, flimsy guarantee that no forced redundancies or retrenchments would be made until 18 months into the life of the new body.

Then came the students, who only ever exist as spreadsheet returns and subsidised allocations for the managerial classes. As South Australian Greens MP Robert Simms [observed](#) at the time, the historical legacy from such amalgamation drives is hardly glorious. “The experience of mergers from interstate and overseas demonstrates that they inevitably result in job losses and a reduction in the quality of the student experience.”

The Malinauskas government was also doing its bit of crystal ball gazing, [stating](#) that there was “a demand for skilled labour in South Australia, unlike any other time in our history, and that demand is likely to grow as our economy becomes necessarily more complex.” Such words are hard to divorce from the military-defence complex that this new institution is bound to be feeding, given Australia’s still futuristic role in being a nuclear-submarine power.

As for prediction-prone vice-chancellors themselves, they believe that research earnings amounting to A\$100 million will be coming into the kitty by 2034, another futuristic stab in the dark. University of Adelaide vice-chancellor Peter Hoj is even confident that A\$50 million in annual research funds on research will be released.

On July 1, over the course of a weekend (by wary of university officials who deliberate on a Saturday), the governing councils of both universities voted to approve the amalgamation. Their meek compliance had the full, open-wallet endorsement of Premier Malinauskas, who [announced](#) the next day that A\$115 million would be paid to the institutions in exchange for taking over surplus land, with A\$30 million granted for the purpose of attracting international students. A fund to make the managers salivate is also being created via a A\$300 million perpetual investment fund. The universities, in being told that they will have to work within these margins, promise to match the amounts.

Concrete details, as they always do on such matters, remain inscrutably patchy. The bill on the merger, which will include IT considerations, course syllabi changes and staff

redundancies, is the stuff of speculation and secrecy. \$A450 million [is one calculation](#) doing the rounds.

Nor is there any genuine assessment about the benefits of such a behemoth. A [petition](#) against the amalgamation, which has so far garnered 1,386 signatures, outlines their common defects, from the “loss of institutional identity” inherent to the specific institutions to the matters of decreased competition and a loss of local control.

The National Tertiary Education Union, long defanged in its wars against the corporate marauders and management buccaneers, is at least willing to offer some words of concern. Its SA division secretary, Andrew Miller, fears that the amalgamation “could be catastrophic”, feeling that an open and independent inquiry, be it through an independent commission or parliament, is a necessary precondition. But as we have seen, Malinauskas cares little for such procedural or intellectual decencies.

The [power dynamics behind the merger](#) should also be noted. The negotiators involved will be handsomely rewarded for their obeisance. The vice-chancellor of UniSA, David Lloyd, is considered the favourite for assuming the reins of the new combine, with Hoj set to get the chancellor’s spot.

Any such merger will require the approval of the Upper House of South Australia’s parliament, which the government does not, mercifully, control. The Greens have stated they will oppose the merger. They certainly should. Those who stand the most to lose in this institutional swindle – the toiling staff and the students treated as the perennial digits in a dying system – have been arrogantly ignored.

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