

“AdvanceHE

+ Insights from the Anglia Ruskin University merger

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1 Purpose, aims and approach

Writtle University College merged with Anglia Ruskin University on 29 February 2024. There is now one higher education entity, Anglia Ruskin University. For further education, a separate further education college has been established within the Anglia Ruskin Corporate Group. The further education arm is subject to its own governing body, which sits under the governing body of the University. We offer below a little background to each of the former institutions for context.

Co-produced by Anglia Ruskin University and Advance HE, this report captures insights from key stakeholders across both legacy institutions. The Advance HE team brought together their expertise in governance, institutional cultures, systems thinking and change management to synthesise the merger journey and extract themes and insights relevant to the sector.

This insight report will sit alongside other Advance HE resources and contribute to a growing body of knowledge on leading large-scale change. It is intended to support institutions considering or undertaking similar transformations.

While the merger was strategically necessary and carefully planned, it also represented a significant cultural shift for both institutions. The insights gathered reflect not only operational success but also the emotional and professional impact on those involved.

The Advance HE team independently gathered both qualitative and quantitative data from a range of sources, with a focus on understanding the drivers behind the merger and the experiences of stakeholders up to day one.

Advance HE extends its sincere thanks to all Anglia Ruskin University staff (from both legacy institutions) and members of the governing body for sharing their insights, and to Holly Duglan, former Registrar and Secretary at Writtle University College.

Thanks and acknowledgement also go to colleagues at Anglia Ruskin University, without whom it would not have been possible to offer this insights report. These include James Rolfe, Chief Operating Officer, Paul Bogle, University Secretary and Dawn Taylor, Deputy Secretary (Compliance and Risk), who served as members of a project steering group and gave their feedback, suggestions and improvements to the early and final versions. Their thoughtful contributions, collaborative spirit and commitment to shaping a narrative that is open, reflective and valuable to the sector has proven invaluable.

The report was written by Dr David Ashton, Advance HE Associate, with support from Kim Ansell, Senior Consultant Governance and Transformation.

+ Writtle University College

Writtle University College was established in 1893 as County Laboratories, teaching agriculture and horticulture. It obtained University College status in May 2016 following the granting of taught degree awarding powers by the Privy Council in 2015.

The College specialised in land-based, animal, design and sports disciplines spanning higher education, further education and a range of short courses.

Within academic contexts, the University College was held in high regard. It enjoyed an excellent reputation for the quality of its students' experience. Its students achieved consistently good academic outcomes. The College was valued for its regional engagement, in and around the county of Essex, and for its contribution to land-based professions.

Notwithstanding these accomplishments, by 2020 the University College was in significant financial distress. Writtle University College had high operating costs. Maintaining a 170-hectare estate for the delivery of land-based courses was expensive. Opportunities to offset costs by securing additional funding from regulators were limited. Nationally, student applications to land-based disciplines were in decline. The specialised nature of the University College's portfolio made it difficult to respond to changing student demand by diversifying the academic offer to gain new market share.

By 2023, there were serious doubts as to whether the University College could remain a going concern into the 2024/25 academic year. Clear that a radical change was necessary to secure the future of the institution in some form, and thus protect its charitable objectives, the University College governing body entered into dialogue with a range of potential partners. These included Anglia Ruskin University and several commercially owned higher education providers. Duly, Anglia Ruskin University emerged as Writtle University College's choice as merger partner.

+ Anglia Ruskin University

Anglia Ruskin University was founded in 1858 as the Cambridge School of Art. The institution grew, acquiring the Cambridgeshire College of Arts and Technology and the Essex Institute of Higher Education. These colleges combined to become, firstly, Anglia Polytechnic and then Anglia Polytechnic University in 1992. The name Anglia Ruskin University was adopted in 2005.

The modern-day university has campuses in Cambridgeshire, Essex and London. There are four faculties: The Faculty of Arts, Humanities, Education and Social Sciences; The Faculty of Business and Law; The Faculty of Health, Medicine and Social Care; and the Faculty of Science and Technology. The University has around 35,000 students.

The Anglia Ruskin University Strategy emphasises a significant strategic contribution to the economic, social and cultural wellbeing of Cambridgeshire, Essex and the University's wider region, and the importance of strong local and regional partnerships to achieve this.

Merger with Writtle University College aligned with the University's strategic objectives.

2 Executive summary and key opportunities

The merger of Anglia Ruskin University and Writtle University College was driven by a clear and compelling rationale. Leaders reached early agreement that merger meant the formation of one legal entity with a vision to preserve individual aspects of character and operation of both legacy institutions.

Alongside the strategy and vision for the merger, three key components of governance and leadership played a strong role in success:

- + Agility in understanding what was needed to secure effective governance for the merged institution, and speed of implementation. An innovative solution was found for further education provision (part of the Writtle University College portfolio) by nesting a further education governing body within the Anglia Ruskin corporate structure.
- + Leaders at both institutions recognised that visibility, transparency and approachability were essential qualities necessary to secure engagement from students, staff and wider stakeholder communities, and they enacted this throughout the merger process.
- + Mature change management capabilities were important to success. Leaders ensured robust programme and project management functions were in place to deliver the operating solutions required for the merged entity. Addressing all aspects holistically – technical, financial, legal, regulatory, cultural and operational – ensured a strong result.

This report is concerned with actions leading up to the first day operating as a merged entity. Significant progress, at great speed, ensured all formal deadlines were met to ensure the successful day one operations. However, it is noteworthy that, as with all changes of this type, the formal stages leading to merged operations are but one stage in a merger process proper.

As a community, colleagues shared and were afforded the opportunity to express emotions of relief, sadness, satisfaction and pride. This human story comes through strongly in the narrative about this merger.

Work remains to fully integrate systems while some cultural and operational changes are still to be embedded. Colleagues continue to adjust to new ways of working, some in an environment much different in scale than they were used to.

While the merger was underpinned by a shared vision and strategic alignment, it is important to note it also surfaced complex emotional and cultural dynamics. Not all stakeholders experienced the process positively, and some expressed concerns about identity, pace of change and long-term implications. These perspectives are important in understanding the full impact of the transformation.

A summary of all sector insights is included in Appendix 1.

3 Key themes

This section presents the key insights, informed by stakeholders, which may support other institutions considering strategic change or partnership. Each theme includes a narrative with background to how the merger was perceived by different stakeholders across the two legacy institutions. Key insights help guide, inform and support decision-making.

3.1 Strategy and negotiation

University mergers pose a rare and complex strategic challenge. At the heart of this challenge is the vision. It is a unifying force that sets strategic direction, shapes decision-making, and defines the principles under which institutions come together.

+ Both institutions entered negotiations with a clear and compelling rationale for merger

For the Writtle University College Board, faced with an insurmountable financial challenge, merger with Anglia Ruskin University was the final act to preserve the institution's mission, heritage and values.

For Anglia Ruskin University, merger with Writtle University College was an opportunity to extend a strategy of inclusive, entrepreneurial education and research alongside regional impact.

Negotiations were not always straightforward and differences in institutional cultures, priorities and expectations required careful negotiation. Compromise was needed to ensure good relations between both parties prevailed.

+ Both institutions established their 'non-negotiable red lines' early

Leaders at both institutions were clear on their boundaries, limitations and their negotiating positions. Some of these red lines were self-imposed and some were in place because of the constitution or the nature of the legal entity they had to accommodate.

For Writtle University College, red lines included the protection of its further education provision. For Anglia Ruskin University, they included the wholesale transfer of higher education provision to the University, meaning there would be one higher education entity.

+ Leaders agreed that merger meant forming one entity from two, but it should not mean a complete coming together in all aspects of character and operation

It was recognised that students chose to study at Writtle University College because of its distinct set of qualities and characteristics. It was deemed important these should be preserved.

Not all stakeholders were persuaded this would be possible. Some questioned whether the preservation of distinct qualities would be achievable in practice, arguing that merger would dilute the identity of the smaller institution.

+ **Comprehensive due diligence strengthened the negotiating process but was not allowed to slow down momentum**

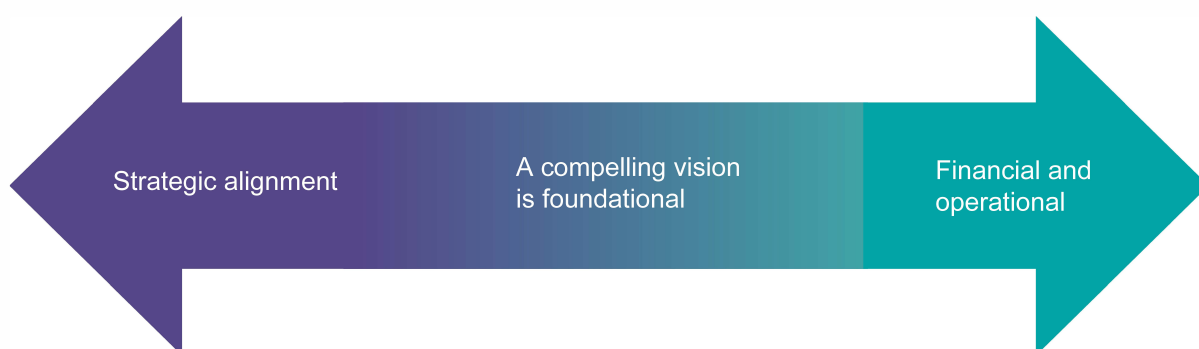
Both institutions undertook due diligence on each other, with the more critical task resting with Anglia Ruskin University as the inheritor of all assets and liabilities of Writtle University College, including its 170-hectare estate. Leaders at Anglia Ruskin University were careful to ensure a balance between complete information and sufficient information for timely decision-making.

+ **Great care was taken over language and tone during negotiations and in the management of subsequent processes on both sides**

The language of 'partnership' and 'merger' was employed on a consistent basis. Words such as 'take over' and 'acquisition' were avoided. An agreed lexicon was strictly adhered to as the merger progressed.

3.2 Insights for the sector – strategy and negotiation

- + Leaders should have clear and compelling reasons for agreeing to enter merger negotiations and options should already have been evaluated by the governing body and leadership teams.
- + Discussions benefit from the early declaration of 'red lines' and the rehearsal of any additional constraints these or other factors might create.
- + Leaders should be clear on the values, character and qualities of their proposed partner and should use this understanding to frame decisions regarding the extent to which merger should mean a complete coming together in all aspects of character and operation.
- + Leaders should be adaptable to changes in the balance of power during the different stages of the negotiations process and subsequent operational stages leading to merger.
- + Leaders should balance the need for comprehensive due diligence with the need to maintain momentum with the process, accepting the need to reach some answers with sufficient but not complete information.
- + All parties need to exhibit great care over language and tone during negotiations and in the management of subsequent processes. The optics surrounding negotiation and merger require careful curation.



3.3 Governance

+ Both governing bodies secured the necessary skills base to ensure effective oversight of the merger process

The merger placed additional demands on governing body members and both governing bodies recognised that they were exposed to skills gaps. Both identified the need for, and invested in, new skills and expertise through an honest dialogue about the capability needed to deliver the merger. At the May 2025 UUK Efficiency Summit, 50% of attendees indicated that across all areas of the institution they lacked embedded transformation capability. Understanding what merger capability already existed within leadership, staff and governance teams enabled better planning and resource allocation and supported success.

+ Both governing bodies achieved a balance between deference and control during different stages of the merger

Both addressed the need to protect their own organisation's interests while respecting each other's control of different stages of the merger process.

The Anglia Ruskin University governing body respected the primacy of the Writtle University College governing body throughout the early stages of the process. However, once a decision was made to merge, the Anglia Ruskin University governing body assumed control. The Anglia Ruskin University governing body established a sub-group to oversee the merger. Members of the Writtle University College governing body were not involved in the governance sub group but instead focused on the changes it would need to make as a new governing body reporting to the Anglia Ruskin University board.

+ Both governing bodies accepted the need for transparency in matters of business beyond the merger during the merger period

Mutual transparency was needed to build trust and to safeguard decisions that might have impact once the merger was complete. To this end, the University Secretary at Anglia Ruskin University observed Writtle University College governing body meetings. The Writtle University College Secretary conversely observed governing body meetings at Anglia Ruskin University.

+ New and innovative solutions were found for effective governance

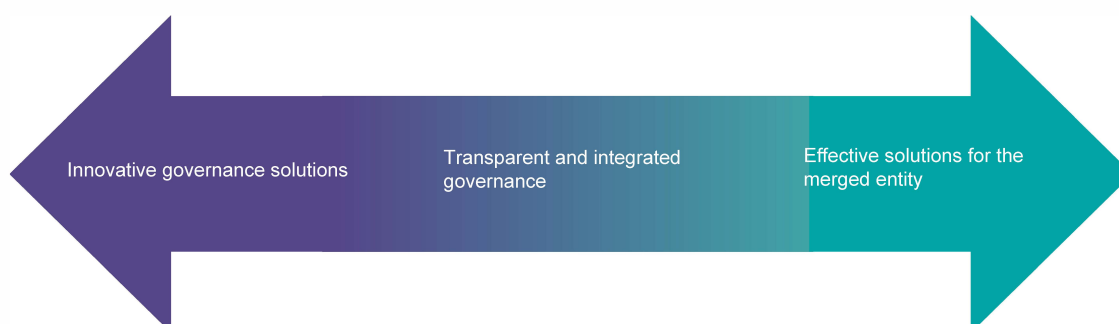
A new further education governing body was established for Writtle University's College's further education provision nested within the Anglia Ruskin University corporate structure. This ensured all necessary independence of oversight as a Further Education Corporation with some responsibilities reserved for the University as the parent organisation. Operational support was provided through a shared services model. The arrangement was approved by the Department for Education through a Section 28 application process.

The Section 28 application process required detailed documentation outlining the governance structure, financial viability and educational strategy of the proposed Further Education Corporation. This included legal advice, stakeholder consultation and iterative engagement with

the Department for Education. The approval was a critical milestone, a major step forward in completing the merger.

3.4 Insights for the sector – governance

- + Governing bodies should ensure that, across their membership, they have the necessary skills to support the merger successfully, ensuring gaps in experience and/or skills are addressed early on.
- + Governing bodies should anticipate that they will experience variable levels of control at different stages of the merger process.
- + During the negotiating and operational stages, governing bodies should address their preparedness to be transparent with their merger partner on matters not related to the business of merger, particularly regarding decisions that will impact the merged entity in due course.
- + Giving consideration at an early stage to the design and structure of governance in a merged entity, including any opportunities for sharing resource, good practice and services will have benefits later. Governing Bodies must be able to find innovative solutions to governance which ensure integrated and effective governance arrangements are in place and that they fully address regulatory requirements.



3.5 Leadership and culture

- + **Leaders at both institutions recognised that visibility, engagement and approachability were essential qualities necessary to carry their stakeholders with them**

The personal credibility of leaders, the strength of their public commitment to the merger and its intended outcomes, and the way they made and conveyed decisions were key to creating a climate of respect, trust and support.

- + **Leaders needed to respond to the changing power dynamics between the two institutions as merger progressed**

Power is an integral aspect of culture, shaping practices and interactions in an institution, and the power dynamic ahead of day one legal merger had to be carefully navigated. The executive leadership team at Writtle University College helped to initiate the process of merger and secure its early stages. Subsequent control was lost as responsibility passed to Anglia Ruskin University

for the development of future operating models. No longer architects of solutions, Writtle University College leaders were unable to provide their colleagues with the same direction, guidance and support as they had in the past, prompting a reassessment of their remaining leadership role. The change in circumstances was also felt by Writtle University College staff, who themselves were required to reassess their expectations of their leadership group in the latter stages as the merger progressed.

+ Leaders proactively managed relationships with regulatory authorities

Under Section 28 of the Further and Higher Education Act, 1992, Anglia Ruskin University was required to apply for formal designation as a post-16 years provider. The processes relating to Section 28 proved complicated and protracted. Proactive and agile leadership was required to ensure timelines were met that enabled the wider progress necessary to achieve the merger on time. A unifying approach to leadership enabled this.

3.6 Insight for the sector – leadership and culture

- + Merger amplifies the need for visible and unifying leadership.
- + Leaders must be able to create a positive vision for the merged entity and do so in a manner that is sensitive to their audiences, recognising that students, staff and other stakeholders will come to the merger with different expectations and concerns.
- + Leaders must be responsive to changing power dynamics between them as the merger process progresses.
- + Leaders must be proactive in managing relations and addressing issues with regulatory bodies drawing upon expertise and support from external legal advisors where it is beneficial and typically necessary to do so.
- + At the outset of the merger process, leaders should ensure they possess a thorough understanding of all relevant external regulatory contexts that pertain to the merger and should ensure that contingency plans are in place to accommodate any regulatory changes, or delays associated with the regulators themselves.



3.7 Communication and engagement

- + **Leaders aspired to communicate a clear vision of the benefits of merger and maintain consistent internal and external messaging to support students, staff and stakeholders through change**

The essential challenge rested in finding the right balance between transparency and providing a consistent narrative that explained the merger at every stage, and the need to remain discreet about some activities until such time as full public disclosure was appropriate.

A sensitive approach towards the recipients of messages meant segregating audiences and adopting different tones in different places while maintaining a consistent overarching storyline.

- + **Past transparency assisted when communicating merger plans with staff**

The leadership at Writtle University College had always been honest and open with staff. They kept colleagues informed about the financial challenge, establishing the possibility that radical change might be necessary at some point to secure a sustainable future.

For many colleagues, knowing this context helped temper the sadness that was felt at the loss of institutional autonomy. There was relief that a permanent solution for the future had been found and that uncertainty would end in due course.

- + **Internal and external communications were carefully coordinated with parameters agreed for tailoring messages to different stakeholder groups**

Merger was not a linear process, characterised by a set of decisions and actions made sequentially. The irregular cadence with which decisions were reached did at times compromise communications teams' abilities to consistently provide information in a manner their audiences deemed timely.

Thirty-three stakeholder groups were identified by the communications teams, ranging from students and staff to Members of Parliament and Public Sector Regulatory Bodies.

Communications were tailored by audience and to each phase of the merger process.

Town Hall events allowed staff to hear directly from both Vice Chancellors and ask questions and raise concerns. Feedback from these events was used to shape future communications and address emerging issues.

More structured change management sessions, informal drop-ins and regular digital media posts were also used to build a steady drumbeat of communication to keep up momentum and build trust.

- + **Messages, lexicon and tone were curated with care**

A joint house style for communicating about the merger was agreed. Messages were to be human-centred, transparent, responsive and anchored in the key words of 'merger' and 'co-ownership'. 'Corporate speak' and overly excited 'happy talk' were purposely avoided.

Despite these efforts, some staff across both institutions felt that communications lacked depth or failed to address their specific concerns. Informal feedback suggested that certain groups, particularly those in field-based or specialist roles, felt disconnected from the core narrative and decision-making processes, although our next point mitigated this to some extent.

+ Staff representatives made a substantial contribution to connecting staff with the merger process

Both institutions had established staff representative networks. Staff representatives proved invaluable for ensuring the cascade of messages across the workforce. Staff representatives were particularly important for reaching the field-based staff at Writtle University College, who had fewer opportunities to engage with the merger process through the digital media channels that served other constituencies well. Staff representative networks were used to support and engage field-based staff who had limited access to corporate communications via digital media.

3.8 Insights for the sector – communication and engagement

- + Leaders should communicate a clear vision of the benefits of merger and maintain consistent internal and external messaging to support cultural evolution.
- + Segregate audiences and tailor messages. Balance transparency with sensitivity and communicate carefully, managing timing and tone and find the right balance between discretion and openness.
- + Transparency can provide colleagues with the context and knowledge required to help process change. For example, not just what decision was made, but why.
- + Care is needed in curating messages, including choices around lexicon and tone. The language often applied to merger in commercial contexts does not always translate well in the higher education context.
- + It will not always be possible to make decisions in a linear fashion. Leaders need to find ways to navigate the irregular cadence of decisions while continuing to communicate meaningfully with students, staff and wider stakeholders to maintain engagement with the merger process.
- + Listening is important. Leaders have access to colleagues, office holders and established informal iterative channels to help maintain information flows. Within the organisational and cultural parameters that apply to the institution, these should be used to help keep students, staff and other stakeholders informed about the progress of the merger and help retain goodwill.



3.9 Operations

+ **Mature change management capability is an important component in success**

A Project Board, chaired by a senior officer at Anglia Ruskin University, was established and assumed coordinating responsibilities across the technical, financial, legal, regulatory, cultural and strategy aspects of merger. The Project Board also ensured robust controls were in place for the management of risk.

+ **A collaborative approach involving staff of both institutions was instrumental in understanding operational priorities and for securing progress on time**

Several workstreams were established reporting to the Project Board. These drew upon the knowledge of colleagues from both institutions who were experts in their areas of operation. As shared entities involving staff from both partners, the workstreams helped to galvanise the two communities into action together.

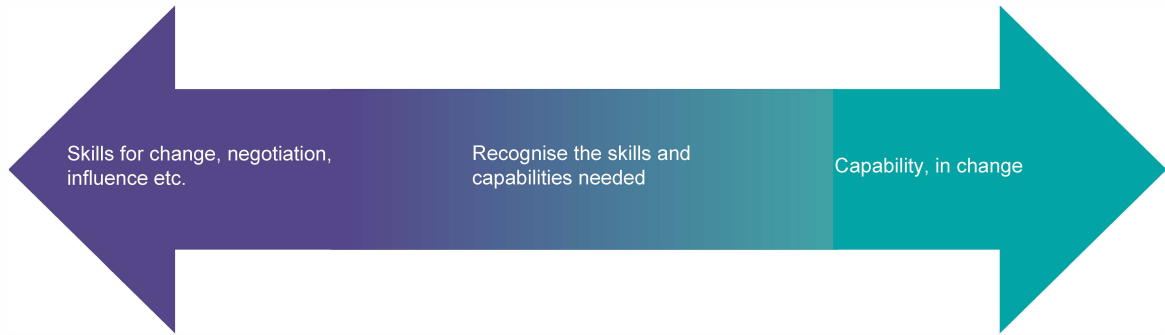
Workstreams also provided a basis for the distribution of workloads, balancing the need for pace with managing pressures on staff.

+ **A proven project methodology helped**

For many members of staff at Anglia Ruskin University, major change management was not new. In 2022, the University opened a new campus in Peterborough, Cambridgeshire. The experience of this project, the methodologies adopted and the belief and conviction borne of its success, all contributed to the effective management of change leading up to day one legal merger and beyond.

3.10 Insights for the sector – operations

- + A successful merger will require the support of many people with a range of skills – for example, influence and negotiation. Leaders should identify effective change leaders and secure their involvement in creating the operating model for the merged entity, using the expertise of colleagues from both institutions.
- + Set and monitor the pace of change, carefully balancing the need to protect staff with the essential task of ensuring deadlines are not broken.
- + Mature change management capability is an important component in success. Leaders must ensure that robust programme and project management functions are in place to deliver the operating solutions required for the merged entity. Addressing all aspects holistically – technical, financial, legal, regulatory, cultural and operational – can help. Separating out individual elements is unlikely to deliver a strong result.



3.11 People

+ **The goodwill of staff was crucial for the successful management of change**

For many members of staff at Writtle University College, supporting the merger was a major leap of faith. Colleagues engaged with the process not knowing the outcome to their own situations while new operating models and staff frameworks took shape.

+ **New staffing frameworks for the merged entity and targeted operational savings were achieved at pace**

At the start of the merger process, at the formation of strategy stage, a decision was taken by senior leaders at Anglia Ruskin University that future activities on the Writtle University College campus would not be subsidised by other activities across the Anglia Ruskin University corporate group.

By re-modelling modes of operating, and by removing posts in the professional services no longer required following merger, Writtle University College's operating deficit was addressed, and a break-even operating position achieved within six months of formal merger.

+ **Fairness and transparency were key drivers to ensuring equity and parity when employment arrangements changed**

Staff at Writtle University College whose roles were put at risk were given two assurances about their personal circumstance. Firstly, in the event of role reprofiling, personal grades would be held as they were, or moved upwards (never downwards). Secondly, staff who could not be accommodated in the revised staffing frameworks would be redeployed into existing vacancies at Anglia Ruskin University, where possible.

Staff at Writtle University College were TUPEd (Transfer of Undertakings [Protection of Employment]) onto Anglia Ruskin University contracts and Anglia Ruskin University terms and conditions. Any changes to grade and pay were made with immediate effect, on the first day after merger, on 1 March 2024.

As a result of this transparent and fair approach, fewer than 10 staff chose to leave through voluntary redundancy. No compulsory redundancies were required.

+ Merger created a context for an investment into people and practice

This was evident in the case of further education at Writtle College University. In the months preceding merger, a concerted effort was made to achieve a step change in performance. New appointments were made at governing body level and to leadership roles to strengthen provision. Courses were refreshed, curriculums redesigned, pedagogy and practice renewed, and funds released to invest in innovation in practice.

+ The merger process was not a positive experience for all staff

Some staff experienced uncertainty, frustration, or a sense of disempowerment during the merger, especially where decisions felt externally imposed. Others simply found it difficult to engage with change or to help deliver change. Their experience was important, both on a personal level to them, and at an organisational level informing later engagement strategies.

+ For some staff, a loss of cultural identity amplified concerns about a loss of institutional identity

Leaders repeatedly affirmed their commitment to maintain the unique character of both organisations where possible. This was especially important to audiences at Writtle University College where the commitment was repeated and tested at engagement events on campus.

+ Some students at Writtle University College opposed merger

Students feared the unique qualities of the Writtle community would be dissipated by assimilation within a much bigger organisation.

Students also worried about changes to learning and teaching, their relationships with their teachers and professional mentors, and that their campus climate would change.

+ Students at Writtle University College had concerns relating to degree certification

Many students at Writtle University College believed that, for them, given the land-based contexts in which they intended to work, there was greater currency in a Writtle University College qualification than one conferred by Anglia Ruskin University.

The University responded to these concerns by finding an innovative solution. Adopting 'Writtle University College' as a trading name meant that the University created a context where it could refer to Writtle University College on University degree certificates for graduates of Writtle-based courses.

3.12 Insights for the sector - people

- + The goodwill of staff is an important component in success.
- + Leaders should ensure appropriate formal and informal support mechanisms are in place for students and colleagues, for some of whom merger will provoke a deep sense of loss.
- + Each institution will be immersed in their own cultural identity and ways of operating, creating unique experiences for students and staff. Leaders need to be clear on the extent to which cultural integration is necessary for successful merger.
- + Campus climates are important to student learning. Any changes to campus dynamics can be challenging. Leaders should take steps to alleviate distress for students worried about changes to their learning and the quality of their student experience.
- + The facility to identify with a legacy institution can remain important after merger. Leaders should explore methods for addressing a desire for stakeholders to remain connected with a legacy institution, notwithstanding it may no longer be an independent entity.



4 Conclusions

To understand the Anglia Ruskin University / Writtle University College story and offer some useful insight, the project team listened to a range of perspectives. These included those who had oversight for merger, those who designed the transformation, those who implemented up to day one and those who were impacted by merger, recognising that some stakeholders may be in more than one group.

This work complements the [Governing and Leading Transformation Member Benefit series for 2024/25](#).

Getting to day one of merger requires a robust and wide-ranging evaluation of all the strategic options available before embarking on a merger journey, and creating a clear and compelling vision that all stakeholders can see themselves contributing to and making happen regardless of whether they have a future role in the organisation or not.

The merger journey was not without its tensions. Cultural differences, emotional responses and dissenting voices all form part of the lived experience. Acknowledging these complexities is essential not only for institutional learning but also for offering a more authentic and useful insight to others considering similar transformations.

Merger will not be right for all organisations and many of the insights in this report will be relevant to other types of strategic transformation, which can also be resource intensive and complex. The levels of complexity and intensity shift depending on which path is chosen and there is a strategic, legal, administrative and emotional complexity and effort in undertaking major organisational change.

Anglia Ruskin University After Action Review

Prior to the development of this insight report, Anglia Ruskin University commissioned an After Action Review (AAR) in October 2024 to reflect on the merger process. Facilitated by external consultants, the AAR provided a structured and candid environment for stakeholders to explore expectations, lived experiences and lessons learned. Its aim was to surface key themes around culture, communication and operational complexity, and generate actionable recommendations to shape ongoing integration efforts. The AAR served as an important internal milestone for the University and now provides a basis for broader sector-facing reflection.

Appendix 1: A summary of insights

There are three overarching opportunities to consider when undertaking a merger or strategic transformation:

- + Agility in understanding what was needed to secure effective governance for the merged institution, and speed with its implementation. An innovative solution was found for further education provision (part of the Writtle University College portfolio) by nesting a further education governing body within the Anglia Ruskin corporate structure.
- + Leaders at both institutions recognised that visibility, transparency and approachability were essential qualities necessary to secure engagement from students, staff and wider stakeholder communities, and they enacted this throughout the merger process.
- + Merger created a context for a sustainable investment in education delivery (both people and facilities) for longer term innovation.

The themes in this report surface more insights, summarised here.

Theme		Insights
Strategy and negotiation	1	Institutions should have clear and compelling reasons for agreeing to enter merger negotiations.
	2	Discussions benefit from the early declaration of 'red lines' and the rehearsal of any additional constraints these or other factors might create.
	3	Leaders should be clear on the values, character and qualities of their proposed partner and should use this understanding to frame decisions regarding the extent to which merger should mean a complete coming together in all aspects of character and operation.
	4	Leaders should be adaptable to changes in the balance of power during the different stages of the negotiations process and subsequent operational stages leading to merger.
	5	Leaders should balance the need for comprehensive due diligence with the need to maintain momentum with the process, accepting the need to reach some answers with sufficient but not complete information.
	6	All parties need to exhibit great care over language and tone during negotiations and in the management of subsequent processes. The optics surrounding negotiation and merger require careful curation.

Governance	7	Governing Bodies should ensure that across their membership they have the necessary skills represented to support the merger successfully, ensuring any gaps in experience and/or skills are addressed early on.
	8	Governing Bodies should anticipate they will experience variable levels of control of different stages of the merger process.
	9	During the negotiating and operational stages, Governing Bodies should address their preparedness to be transparent with their merger partner on matters not related to the business of merger, particularly regarding decisions that will impact the merged entity in due course.
	10	Governing Bodies must be able to find innovative solutions to governance arrangements to address regulatory issues, and to ensure effective governance arrangements are in place for the merged entity in due course.
Leadership	11	Merger amplifies the need for visible leadership.
	12	Leaders must be able to create a positive vision for the merged entity and do so in a manner that is sensitive to their audiences, recognising that students, staff and other stakeholders will come to the merger with different expectations and concerns.
	13	Leaders must be responsive to changing power dynamics between them as the merger process progresses.
	14	Leaders must be proactive in managing relations and addressing issues with regulatory bodies, drawing upon expertise and support from external legal advisors where it is beneficial to do so.
	15	At the outset of the merger process, leaders should ensure they possess a thorough understanding of all relevant external regulatory contexts that pertain to the merger and should ensure that contingency plans are in place to accommodate any regulatory changes, or delays associated with the regulators themselves.
Communication and engagement	16	Leaders should communicate a clear vision of the benefits of merger and maintain consistent internal and external messaging to support cultural evolution.

	17	Segregate audiences and tailor messages. Balance transparency with sensitivity and communicate carefully, managing timing and tone and find the right balance between discretion and openness.
	18	Transparency can provide colleagues with the context knowledge required to help process change.
	19	Care is needed in curating messages, including choices around lexicon and tone. The language often applied to merger in commercial contexts does not always translate well in the higher education context.
	20	It will not always be possible to make decisions in a linear fashion. Leaders need to find ways to navigate the irregular cadence of decisions while continuing to communicate meaningfully with students, staff and wider stakeholders to maintain engagement with the merger process.
	21	Listening is important. Leaders have access to colleagues, office holders and established informal iterative channels to help maintain information flows. Within the organisational and cultural parameters that apply to the institution, these should be used to help keep students, staff and other stakeholders informed about the progress of the merger and help retain goodwill.
Operations	22	A successful merger will require the support of many influential people. Leaders should identify effective change leaders and secure their involvement in creating the operating model for the merged entity, using the expertise of colleagues from both institutions.
	23	Leaders must set and monitor the pace of change, carefully balancing the need to protect staff with the essential task of ensuring deadlines are not broken.
	24	Mature change management capability is an important component in success. Leaders must ensure that robust programme and project management functions are in place to deliver the operating solutions required for the merged entity. Addressing all aspects holistically – technical, financial, legal, regulatory, cultural and operational can help. Separating out individual elements is unlikely to deliver a strong result.
People	25	The goodwill of staff is an important component in success.

	26	Leaders should ensure appropriate formal and informal support mechanisms are in place for students and colleagues, for some of whom merger will provoke a deep sense of loss.
	27	Each institution will be deeply immersed in their own cultural identity and ways of operating, creating unique experiences for students and staff. Leaders must be clear on the extent to which cultural integration is necessary for successful merger.
	28	Campus climates are important to student learning. Any changes to campus dynamics can be challenging. Leaders should take steps to alleviate distress for students worried about changes to their learning and the quality of their student experience.
	29	The facility to identify with a legacy institution can remain important after merger. Leaders should explore methods for addressing a desire for stakeholders to remain connected with a legacy institution, notwithstanding it may no longer be an independent entity.

Appendix 2: Insights from merger partners

Birketts LLP – Reflections on collaborative working in the ARU merger

Birketts LLP was pleased to play a key role in supporting Anglia Ruskin University (ARU) through its merger process, working in close partnership with other professional advisors and ARU's leadership and governance team. The collaboration was underpinned by clear communication, well-defined responsibilities, aligned objectives and a shared commitment to delivering a smooth, timely and compliant transition.

Birketts LLP led on property due diligence and documentation. This was a critical and complex component of the merger given the scale and diversity of Writtle University College's (WUC) estate, which held strategic importance and value and therefore was a key factor in the context of financial sensitivities and challenges faced by the target institution in the lead-up to the merger. Our remit included a comprehensive review of title documentation and a wide range of property contracts, and the resolution of several intermittent and unexpected issues across a large campus comprising student and staff accommodation, commercial buildings, and agricultural land, all of which were subject to many third-party rights, occupiers and title encumbrances.

Our team helped to identify the priority issues out of very large amounts of estates data and provided timely and clear advice on courses of action; our approach enabled ARU to make informed decisions and maintain momentum throughout the process. In particular, we introduced an innovative solution to help address a key concern around the request by WUC for ARU to commit to providing a substantial sum in stop-gap funding, if required, in order to avoid any risk of WUC not continuing to meet the financial stability requirements of the OfS Regulatory Framework during the several month regulatory approval period leading up to merger close and the order for dissolution; when the merger contract was effectively still conditional. In short order we negotiated a flexible but effective mechanism for the identification and valuation of an appropriate land parcel which would be transferred to ARU simultaneously with any financial injection being made by ARU. Thankfully never needed, the agreed set of undertakings did provide a more comfortable platform for both parties to continue negotiations of the binding merger agreement.

This experience highlights the importance of early legal alignment and strong collaboration within an overall well-managed project. For institutions considering merger, we recommend establishing a unified legal strategy, setting out well-defined responsibilities of each party (both within the stakeholders and the legal and other professional advisors), all of which being well embedded in the overall project team with its regular engagement and progress tracking. We found that this approach supported confident decision-making and a successful Day 1.

Mills & Reeve

Mills & Reeve (“M&R”) advised Anglia Ruskin University (“ARU”) on the legal aspects of the merger, from advising on the initial structuring and mechanics of the merger through to negotiation and seeking regulatory approvals to see the merger through to completion. The process was complex as it involved de-coupling the HE and FE aspects of Writtle University College and transferring the HE side to ARU and the FE side to a newly incorporated subsidiary of ARU, Writtle College Limited. The multi-disciplinary M&R team, led by Partner Poppy Short, included specialists from its corporate, commercial, regulatory, finance, employment, competition, pensions and UKVI teams. M&R worked alongside Birketts, who were appointed by ARU to advise on the real estate elements of the transaction.

M&R worked collaboratively with the ARU team, including Paul Bogle (University Secretary and Clerk), Dawn Taylor (institutional lead), and Michelle Lawlor-Perkins (Head of Legal). We also fed into relevant Council meetings and liaised with other members of the Senior Leadership Team to ensure that the strategic aims of the project were being met. We had frequent contact with the ARU team throughout the merger process, including regular calls to discuss legal issues, answer questions and give strategic input. There was a high level of trust across the teams, which enabled us all to make decisions that were informed and come up with suggestions to overcome obstacles.

There was clarity on ARU’s strategic vision and key red lines, which was helpful in driving the transaction forward. The Council and the Senior Leadership Team were aligned and clear on the rationale for merger and the redlines. Part of this vision was to ensure that ARU met its commitments to Writtle colleagues in developing the business plan for Writtle University College to join ARU to include investment into the Writtle campus. This level of commitment underpinned the merger negotiations and aided the process.

There was a clear division of roles between M&R, Birketts and the ARU team. ARU took on certain defined elements of the merger process themselves (e.g. some of the DD, liaising with the DfE and OfS particularly in respect of the section 28 designation application for Writtle College Limited) and M&R offered support where required in relation to these elements. M&R and Birketts, both long standing advisors to ARU, acted as ‘one team’, providing seamless and integrated advice on the merger.

1 Regulatory compliance and challenges encountered

Mergers of education providers, by nature, involve a range of regulatory requirements. This merger was the first significant merger in the higher education sector in over 20 years so there were many regulatory challenges to overcome. ARU worked closely with the DfE and the OfS on this merger with support from M&R.

We liaised with the OfS and the DfE to provide that students transferring from Writtle University College would be entitled to receive a degree award in the name of Writtle University College, on the basis of ARU adopting this name as a trading name. This important development helped to reassure students who were concerned about not

receiving an award in Writtle's name and the same process has been since used for other mergers.

With Writtle University College dissolving by way of a statutory order of the Secretary of State, all contracts were transferred to ARU or Writtle College immediately upon completion of the merger. This required meticulous planning to ensure that any additional consents to transfer the contracts were obtained in advance of the merger. Similarly, accreditation and registrations had to be dealt with for the merger to complete. An additional complexity in this merger was the inclusion of a subsidiary company into which the further education elements of Writtle College transferred. This required section 28 designation from the DfE and further DfE input into the intra-group arrangements between ARU and the subsidiary, to provide them with comfort that Writtle College has sufficient autonomy and that any funding was to be used for the required purposes within the FE college. These were challenging processes to overcome that ARU and M&R worked together to achieve.

2 Due diligence

M&R supported ARU's due diligence on Writtle. ARU was comfortable carrying out its own due diligence process with external input where required. The close and trusted relationship between ARU SLT and Council meant that they agreed the level of due diligence that was required on Writtle, enough to ascertain what the key risks were but not so much due diligence that it slowed the process down and led to inefficiencies. Time was of the essence in completing the merger, given the financial position of Writtle University College. Matters arising from the due diligence did however feed into the documentation required for the merger and the ongoing integration of the merged entities, for example:

- + preparation of additional documents between the parties to deal with key concerns;
- + any consents required;
- + reviewing apprenticeship arrangements;
- + assessing and evaluating which aspects of the business of Writtle were HE focused and which were FE focused; and
- + advising on the novation of existing Writtle contracts.

3 Integration

What did you notice about integration e.g. policy harmonisation, operational or leadership planning to ensure effective dual operation in the ARU context?

How much clarity was there about the responsibilities and accountabilities of different stakeholders e.g. Board, Staff, Regulators, Legal and others during the pre-merger phase and what impact did this have?

It is critical on a merger such as this to ensure that both parties are clear on the integration process and what the merged entity will ultimately look like. M&R carried out preparatory work with ARU to ensure that the right structure would be implemented to enable ARU to

support Writtle as part of the ARU group, taking advantage of the wider central functions of ARU but with sufficient autonomy to grow a new standalone FE college. It was evident that both parties to this merger were united in the cultural and strategic fit and they were cooperative and supportive throughout the integration process. With Writtle being the smaller entity, it was also natural for a larger amount of resource and support to come from ARU throughout the process, notwithstanding this, Writtle University College was able to pass on its experience and knowledge on matters related to FE provision and the agricultural and animal related studies it has expertise in. In the period between signing and MOU and completion of the merger, various strategies were put in place to integrate the parties, including setting up a merger project team, having an observer on each of the parties' boards and taking collective decisions over any material expenditure of exceptional business decisions within Writtle. Harmonisation of policies and systems can be challenging and given the short timescale for the merger, some of this had to be done post merger.

4 Reflections

The ARU/Writtle merger has paved the way for other universities to merge.

5 Conclusion

Regardless of the size of the parties, the merger of two HE institutions is a complex process. The mixture of legal, regulatory and commercial elements requires careful and continuous planning and a strong team to ensure that the merger completes efficiently and with minimal disruption to staff and students.

Two key pieces of advice are:

- + Cultural alignment and synergies over the strategic aims of the merger will be critical to keep the process on track. The parties to this merger were aligned on these issues and with strong leadership, the process was successfully implemented in a respectful and collaborative way. No merger is easy, but the parties involved in this merger have worked hard to meet the strategic aims of the combination, and continue to do so.
- + Planning your merger sufficiently ahead of time, to allow time to plan the cultural integration post completion. Looking ahead to integration at an early stage to ensure that all key elements are in place in good time for day 1 of the merger.

Appendix 3: Purpose and approach

The purpose of this project:

- + Advance HE and ARU have partnered to harness the insights from the recent merger between Writtle College and Anglia Ruskin University. By sharing the merger story from a range of perspectives and experiences they aim to influence policy and inform sector guidance to benefit other institutions considering merger, helping them navigate the complex process more effectively.
- + This initiative will lead to the creation of a draft roadmap for higher education institutions considering mergers, with ARU serving as a case study. The roadmap will offer clear guidance to support institutions through the merger process, ensuring strategic alignment to achieve operational efficiency and benefits to stakeholders. Designed by and for the sector, Advance HE will continuously refine this resource with contributions and insights from other institutions and sector stakeholders, and their merger stories, ensuring it remains relevant and effective.

Project objectives:

- + Co-production: collaborate to create useful documents to support the sector during times of change.
- + Share good practice: incorporate examples and insight from the ARU merger to inform good practice.
- + Capture insights: reflect on unforeseen challenges, impact and timing of decisions, and alternative options to provide valuable insights to others undertaking a merger journey.
- + Stakeholders: to understand the merger from a range of perspectives to ensure that the story is told from the perspective of those who have oversight for merger/change, those who are designing, those who are implementing and those who are impacted. Recognising that some stakeholders may be in more than one group.
- + The work was undertaken using a co-production approach, with guidance from a joint steering group made up of representatives from each organisation. The steering group met periodically throughout the duration of this project, from May to August 2025.
- + The purpose of the steering group was to:
 - Build trust and oversee the collaboration and conduct of the project.
 - Provide guidance in the development of a chronicle of the merger story and derive insight to create a sector resource about managing mergers and large-scale change in HE institutions.
 - Work together on approach, principles and co-production of outputs, including the list of interviewees and interview structure.
 - Exercise editorial control over the outputs and provide final sign off.

- Manage and deploy resource and remove barriers to collaboration success.

Advance HE would like to thank the ARU members of the steering group for their contribution. They worked collaboratively, offering advice, interpreting sensitive information and agreeing a narrative. We also thank all the ARU staff, former staff and governing body members for their time in interviews.

Listening and information gathering

The project team gathered qualitative and quantitative data from multiple sources, with a focus to establish a clear explanation and understanding of the drivers for the merger. The main information took place through a document review and a series of 16 interviews with individuals and groups totaling twenty plus people, who are current and former staff members of the newly merged and legacy institutions.

- + **Documentation: a range of documentation was reviewed including** communication plans, relevant governance papers from both previous organisations, change/process documents to inform our own understanding of the journey and to identify insights and good practice from the documents, including Section 28 application materials and correspondence with the Department for Education.
- + **Cohort and individual interviews:** Advance HE undertook 16 individual and group interviews with a range of stakeholders across both institutions who were involved at different points of the merger process. The interviews were undertaken on a non-attributable basis to avoid investigator bias and to facilitate candour and openness. Interviews were online for expediency and to enable inclusive participation.

Contact us

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