

A review of four case studies in restructuring the South African Higher Education System

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Abstract

This paper examines four institutions which were part of the South African process of restructuring higher education. A study lasting several years focused on implementation and governance choices and encompassed interviews with hundreds of people over extended periods, observation of meetings and scrutiny of documents.

The paper concludes that the UKZN, NMMU and UJ mergers were successful on several fronts, as was the incorporation of the East London campus of RU into UFH, although the full potential of UFH has yet to emerge.

Each of the institutions received funding they would not otherwise have received to improve infrastructure and all used the opportunity to improve wherever possible. Unfinished matters include salary harmonisation and the consolidation and review of academic programmes. In conclusion, HEMSG is concerned that the mergers might lead to an unintended overall increase in admissions criteria as well as increase the vulnerability of vocational qualifications.

Key words

mergers, higher education, educational policy, governance

Acronyms used

CHE	Council on Higher Education	SANTED	South Africa –Norway Tertiary Education Development Programme
		TWR	Technikon Witwatersrand
FET	Further Education and Training	UDW	University of Durban Westville
HEMSG	Higher Education Merger Study Group	UFH	University of Fort Hare
IOP	Institutional Operating Plan	UJ	University of Johannesburg
NMMU	Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University	UKZN	University of KwaZulu-Natal
NWG	National Working Group	UN	University of Natal
PET	Port Elizabeth Technikon	UPE	University of Port Elizabeth
RAU	Rand Afrikaans University		
RU	Rhodes University		

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1. South African higher education mergers

One of the goals of the first National Plan for Higher Education was to “build new institutional identities and organisational forms through restructuring the institutional landscape of the higher education system, thus transcending the fragmentation, inequalities and inefficiencies of the apartheid past” (Ministry of Education, 2002, 5).

The then Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal, instructed a National Working Group (NWG) to focus on long-term and “future possibilities” (Ministry of Education, 2002, 7). At the end of this process, the higher education landscape was reduced from 36 to 21 institutions.

2. Case Studies and methodology

The Higher Education Merger Study Group (HEMSG) was an independent group funded by the A.W. Mellon Foundation to review selected mergers.

- The University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) resulted from the merger of the University of Natal (UN) with the University of Durban-Westville (UDW).

- The University of Fort Hare (UFH) incorporated the East London campus of Rhodes University (RU).

- The Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) was formed from the merger of Port Elizabeth Technikon (PET) and the University of Port Elizabeth (UPE), also incorporating the Port Elizabeth campus of Vista University.
- The University of Johannesburg (UJ) was formed from the merger of the Rand Afrikaans University (RAU) and Technikon Witwatersrand (TWR), also incorporating the East Rand and Soweto campuses of Vista University.

HEMSG conducted its research by visiting the universities concerned for 2 – 3 days at a time. UKZN and UFH were visited six or more times, from before restructuring until April 2007 and August 2008 respectively. The other two were first visited after the mergers; NMMU in September 2007 and August 2008, and UJ in May 2008 and August 2009. HEMSG understands that some situations might have changed after the conclusion of their reviews.

Each visit consisted of a series of interviews with: the Vice-Chancellor; Deputy Vice-Chancellors; Deans; people with portfolios like human resources, finance, IT, library; Heads of Departments and academic staff; staff unions; students and student leaders. HEMSG left it to the institution concerned and to staff and student leaders to select who should meet us, although if we were interested in an issue, we would also specify. Some people requested access to the group. Hundreds of people were interviewed singly and in groups in the process. HEMSG was also invited to observe meetings, such as of the executive or an interim council meeting. Access to other documents such as minutes or reports was always provided. In this way, HEMSG had a privileged overview of the challenges of managing a merger as well as of peoples' impressions of the whole process.

Interview transcriptions were not circulated and people were not identified in reports. HEMSG assured everyone of this and was grateful for their co-operation and candour. Each institution received a final report at the end of the study; UKZN and UFH had several, and NMMU one, interim reports before that. The reports were first sent to the Vice-Chancellor for correction of any errors. Many were made widely available with some placed on university websites. Reports were also sent to the Council on Higher Education and to the Minister of Education.

This paper evaluates how each merger was implemented, with a particular focus on governance, and its success. It concludes with an overview of cross-cutting issues.

3. University of Kwa-Zulu Natal : arguments for merger

Arguments for merging UDW and UN included (Ministry of Education, 2002, 82-83):

- Geographical proximity;
- Overlap and complementarity of programmes;
- More effective deployment and utilisation of academic expertise and other resources;
- Agreement about closer association following extensive discussions in the region.

A joint vision statement recognised that “pooling the best that the two universities have to offer, will create a strong, academically excellent and socially sensitive and responsive university” (UDW and UN, 2002).

3.1. Implementing the merger

The merger created a large university with daunting organisational challenges. In 2004 there were well over 42 000 students and over 4 000 staff, with several large campuses – Howard, Westville, Pietermaritzburg, as well as smaller campuses including the Medical School and Edgewood.

As with all the case studies, frameworks for the merger were established quickly. However, UDW was slow to set up a counterpart to UN's merger unit, so this affected the equality of the partners initially (UN carried a heavy workload and some UDW staff felt disadvantaged with respect to influencing future choices).

Discussion started early about the big choices – governance, faculty location and reorganisation across the multi-campus institution. An early choice the interim Vice-Chancellor made was to establish his office on the old UDW campus (now called Westville). This was an important political gesture, which was consolidated a few years later by new buildings and the relocation of the Faculty of Science to that campus.

At the beginning of 2005, four Colleges were established, with Heads of College who were also Deputy Vice-Chancellors. The Colleges contained eight constituent Faculties and 56 academic Schools. Each faculty had a Dean and Deputy-Deans (the number depending on size and extent); there were also Heads of Schools. In an already complicated system, HEMSG was told that half the Deans and Heads of Schools were new to their posts. UKZN chose a unitary system of academic organisation – governance of one faculty crossed physical locations. This was an important attempt to unify people, but there were also challenges, not least the amount of travel required.

The College model attempted to make the size of UKZN more workable, but disadvantages also surfaced. Decision-making was often duplicated because of the additional layer between faculties and Senate. At the time of HEMSG's last visit, it was thought that some of the layers would fall away, but this still had to occur. Deans were reported to have less power. There were also fears that the College model could lead to isolated silos.

Senate was reduced in size and professors were no longer automatically members. HEMSG heard that only 8 of the first 20 meetings had a quorum, which would have affected its proper functioning. People complained that debate was stifled and this was undoubtedly a factor in its effectiveness (reinforced by battles over freedom of expression after HEMSG's last visit).

There are no easy ways to make decisions about faculty organisation or location; space and funding limitations provide their own constraints. The use of all the campuses reinforced the view that all partners to the merger were equally important, but political decisions had to be taken about faculty location. Different campuses experienced this differently and some of the moves were contested, especially to Westville. Academic staff at the Pietermaritzburg campus often argued that the university was more "fully represented" there because they retained the broadest range of faculty presences, although not necessarily with a Dean or Deputy-Dean. While this is so, there is also a danger that Pietermaritzburg could become (or remain) isolated from the rest of the university, given its distance from the Howard and Westville campuses and its partial self-containment.

The spread of activities over so many campuses inevitably prevented easy contact between people. Of the decisions that were made, most concern was expressed about the separation of the faculties of Science and Engineering on different campuses. Disciplines such as geography

and economics, which serve students in different faculties, also faced problems when these faculties were separated, so that a “service” component had to be retained at other sites. All the case studies faced similar dilemmas.

Relocations on this scale were inevitably disruptive and a logistical nightmare, but the architects of the process were careful to use the opportunity to upgrade wherever possible, using Ministry and other funding. Several people spoke with pride about the state of the art Music department relocated to the Howard campus. Some science departments, particularly those which seized early opportunities, were happy with their upgraded facilities.

3.2. Overall evaluation of the UKZN merger

HEMSG believes that the merger has been successful on several fronts.

- Two geographically close institutions have merged and have a strong new identity.
- All campuses have been utilised. Faculties have been relocated within constraints.
- The merger provided access to funds for upgrading overall and for some new buildings.
- Management structures have merged and a new College organisational structure has settled down. There have been some admirable successes (new facilities and extended academic offerings) where staff have been able to benefit from the situation.
- Admissions criteria and conditions of service have been revised and student governance is running well.

HEMSG has to mention the strike that occurred in 2006. HEMSG does not believe that the strike was directly related to merger matters, although merger issues, such as salaries, were involved and the merger undoubtedly exacerbated tensions. Some of the concerns were with

the culture of the university, including the distance of management from the rest of the staff, and management style. These elements surfaced in later struggles and will have to be resolved so that the institution remains stable. Ironically, the strike seemed to allow merging staff to develop common ground.

There were two major areas where merger-related business was unfinished when HEMSG completed its study – human resource issues and the consolidation of academic programmes. UKZN appeared to have a good roadmap for the harmonisation of salaries and benefits, but the consolidation of academic programmes appeared likely to take much longer and it would be a pity to lose the opportunity. Some academic areas had taken the opportunity to revamp curricula. Others, whether because of various complications or active or covert resistance, had been less successful.

The new Vice-Chancellor wanted to use the opportunity to gear UKZN up and certainly the infrastructure and equipment seem to have benefited. He was insistent that UKZN be a research-based university, with academic staff judged accordingly. Research output has increased, despite staff having to cope with the stresses and extra work of the merger and even though there might be potential problems in the approach taken (for example reducing the retirement age).

The final cost of the merger is only likely to become clear after more years. In some cases, academic staff have been utilised in ways that allow the new institution to do more than it would have done as two separate institutions. This is less clear with regard to support staff. For example, does a multi-campus institution require more support staff, have high executive salaries wiped out any savings, as some academic staff argue.

By the time of the last visit of the HEMSG in April 2007, the balance of attention had moved to the ongoing running of UKZN and it will now be judged, as will any other university, according to indicators such as research output, student access and throughput.

4. University of Fort Hare : arguments for the incorporation

The Ministry of Education argued that the “development and expansion of the University of Fort Hare in East London would facilitate access to higher education of the large and growing population centred around East London and ensure the sustainability of Fort Hare”, preserving and strengthening its heritage (2002, 16). This was “in line with the designation of East London as an industrial development zone by the Provincial Government” (2002, 13).

UFH developed a vision and mission premised on taking “the best of the past into taking up the challenges of the future” (2004, 13).

4.1. Implementing the incorporation

The Institutional Operating Plan (IOP) submitted to the Ministry early in 2004 made a case both for recapitalisation funding for the Alice campus and for substantial investment for growth in East London. Alice and East London became the two main campuses of UFH, with All Saints closed down and activities at Bhisho reduced.

The first phase in re-engineering UFH (2004 to 2006) was to consolidate the incorporation and institute effective systems for growth. The need to develop infrastructure to house core academic programmes and support services was identified, as was the creation of a common identity. Reorganisation of the academic profile of the university was planned, as was

development in identified key areas. Outside funds were raised for staff development and upgrade of systems while they were being aligned.

The second phase from 2007 to 2009 was to be devoted to growth. During this period, enrolments and research output were to be increased; attention was to be given to the quality of teaching as well as to diversifying the university's revenue structure.

Although only some of the faculties were duplicated, UFH took the opportunity to reorganise and chose a single faculty crossing locations, if programmes were offered on more than one site. The original plan was to have professional programmes located in East London (including Law, Accounting, Social Work, Nursing and Education), but these plans were later tempered with some activities staying on the Alice campus.

The previously key post of Campus Director in East London was downgraded, then taken on by the Deputy Registrar. It was felt that the original post performed functions which fell under a Dean's domain, potentially undermining faculty management. Its removal, however, inconvenienced staff and students because most of the administrative functions were located in Alice and the staff visited East London at specified times. Part-time working students, in particular, struggled to gain access to administrators during the day. By the time HEMSG finished its review, UFH had increased the presence of administrators on the East London campus, but the management of day-to-day issues remains a problem on all multi-campus universities.

Even though programmes were complementary, two different cultures were brought together. UFH Alice offered a full spectrum of programmes to mostly residential students; students were often under-prepared and from rural areas. The RU East London campus had a more diverse

student body of mostly non-residential, part-time, mature and working students, studying a smaller range of programmes mostly at evening classes. UFH staff and students were predominantly African (although academic staff mirrored South Africa's demographic profile more closely). Staff at the East London campus of RU were predominantly white, although the student body was more mixed. These differences sometimes led to tensions, which had to be managed. The Alice SRC thought East London students were mostly uninvolved in student activities; Alice administrative staff said they were sometimes stereotyped as incompetent because of their colour. There were, and are, different views of how growth in Alice and East London should be balanced.

Growth of the East London campus presented challenges. Property had to be acquired because the campus was already overloaded, and more students requested residence accommodation. The need for a significant increase in residence accommodation had not been planned and, although UFH used rented accommodation, this put a huge financial burden on the university (and could not be seen as a long-term solution). The success in upgrading the university precinct led to property values increasing, with UFH suffering from its own success. The Minister of Education appeared to become concerned about the pace of moving programmes to East London and the amounts of money requested without any evidence of UFH raising additional funds. There was also opposition from within UFH to some programmes leaving the Alice campus completely. Staff at both campuses perceived that the other got preferential treatment (which HEMSG did not observe), with some Alice staff saying that the East London campus was a "drain" on UFH.

4.2. Overall evaluation of the incorporation

When its study was completed in August 2008, HEMSG believed that, while the incorporation of the East London campus had been successful, the full potential of UFH had not yet emerged.

The Ministry projected growth from around 4 000 to a total headcount of 5 800. In fact, by 2008, headcount enrolments were well over 9 000 with a healthy spread over programmes. There were some concerns, such as a drop in Law enrolments, but faculties such as Science and Agriculture demonstrated a steady increase.

The incorporation of the RU East London campus into UFH was intended to develop a vibrant university to serve the region. It had some major advantages, including the historical legacy of UFH and the possibility of increasing its presence in East London. HEMSG thinks that it is important to take a national perspective; the East London campus gives the region a city campus which will facilitate access, but without having to establish a new university. If it is to consolidate its potential, substantial investment is required in academic buildings as well as residences. It is crucial that a common view be developed between the Ministry and UFH on the pace and future development of the East London campus, so that lack of clarity cannot be exploited by those who did not welcome the incorporation.

HEMSG thinks that it is counter-productive for UFH to see each campus as an isolated cost centre. In any university, more expensive programmes (provided they are appropriate) are cross-subsidised by others. The sensible way is to ask which programmes are appropriate for each campus and not to require each campus to be self-sustaining as a separate entity.

When HEMSG completed its study, the new Vice-Chancellor (who had replaced the Vice-Chancellor in place over the first stage of the process) was entering a period of strategic planning; a key element was to ensure financial sustainability because all else depended on this. HEMSG saw the need for hard decisions in at least two areas. Several people referred to over-investment in non-academic staff. However, job losses in Alice would exacerbate poverty in the area. While sympathetic to this argument, it affects the viability of UFH. A sensible plan, possibly with the input of regional and national government, has to be found. It is also important that the programme and qualification mix be scrutinised in order to prune any inappropriate programmes or courses as well as to build on strengths where subsidy is higher, but without requiring too much additional staff investment.

5. Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) : arguments for the merger

In a limited catchment area, the merger was intended to strengthen higher education provision:

- Programme offerings complemented each other; there were also significant differences which could give NMMU greater scope, offering access to a wider range of students and meeting a greater variety of vocational needs; (Ministry of Education, 2002, 65);
- Rationalisation in undergraduate diplomas and certificates was possible;
- A consolidated endeavour to develop a research culture could be productive;
- Adjacent campuses allowed the possibility of shared infrastructural and administrative resources;
- The incorporation of the Port Elizabeth campus of Vista University would help to integrate students from different backgrounds and provide a presence in a disadvantaged community.

The new institution was to offer both university- and technikon-type programmes and was advised to not to duplicate academic programmes on different campuses. It was warned against academic drift and urged to use extra teaching capacity to extend technikon-type programmes.

5.1. Implementing the merger

As with all the institutions, NMMU moved quickly to draw large numbers of people into developing policies and structures. There was extensive discussion about what type of university NMMU should be. Partly this was because of a merger between a university and an ex-technikon, but it also arose from a history of prior debates about “engagement”.

A key goal for the Vice-Chancellor was to put NMMU on a sound financial footing. Prior to the merger, UPE had had a fixed capital debt of R25 million and PET of R105 million, plus an overdraft of R5 million (though this had been paid off before the merger). The differences in situation led to some resentment from ex-UPE staff who felt that the stability of the new institution was threatened and that prior frugal financial management had been a waste of effort.

NMMU established 7 faculties, with fairly rapid benefits for some areas. The MBA ex-PET, which reportedly fought for recognition in a technikon, did not have the same questions asked of it. The School of Engineering ex-PET did not have to incorporate new staff and was already acknowledged as a strength. Since the merger, a BEng in Mechatronics has been accredited by the Engineering Council of South Africa and NMMU now offers the only Engineering university degrees in the Eastern Cape, and has the potential to expand further. Other areas reported being able to build on distinct areas of strength in the merging partners (such as Education) or being able to offer a wider range of specialities (such as Physics). There were

also areas of concern after faculty reorganisation, such as similar departments of computer science and information systems established in two faculties.

As with other institutions, when staff of merged academic departments worked together, the department often benefited. Different academic requirements and cultures, however, were often intensified when they remained on separate sites.

NMMU will have to manage tensions and expectations with regard to its Missionvale and George campuses. Originally NMMU had hoped to consolidate Health Sciences on the ex-Vista campus, now called Missionvale. Unfortunately, this particular plan would have cost upwards of R400 million and NMMU had to tailor its plans to the funds available. The location of foundation components of extended programmes on this campus seems sensible; NMMU is also able to interact with local schools. Students, however, called this campus a “glorified high school” and urged that a faculty or faculties be located there. Whatever is decided, the Missionvale campus will require good shuttle services, or residences (which no one seemed to support because there were no other facilities for students there). Some questioned the need to retain the Missionvale campus, which had been created within apartheid ideology, and this seems a valid question.

The citizens of George appear to expect the development of a fully fledged university. Strategic location of niche areas, as NMMU has been doing, seems the more sensible option. Contact with that campus appears to work reasonably well through video conference links, although apparently not always reliable. It might prove to be difficult for the George campus to maintain identity with NMMU because of its distance from Port Elizabeth.

Final decisions still had to be made about some moves when HEMSG last visited; for example, the faculties of Arts and Business and Economic Sciences are spread over three campuses. There is apparently also some consideration about whether it is sensible to retain all the city campuses.

Both the Missionvale and George campuses have campus managers, which does not seem to have caused any tensions (although their scope of responsibility was not as extensive as originally at UFH).

5.2. Overall evaluation of the merger

The establishment of NMMU appears to have been successful. The process of the merger was relatively smooth and there was no disruption to business as usual.

The new NMMU has an attractive image and HEMSG supports the Ministry view that it remain a predominantly undergraduate institution with 42% of its enrolments in diploma programmes and a small number of appropriate research areas. As well as salary anomalies, unfinished business concerns the academic shape of NMMU. HEMSG encourages NMMU to protect its vocational and diploma programmes, to prevent academic drift and to maintain access for students with lower entrance qualifications.

6. University of Johannesburg (UJ) : arguments for the merger

The Ministry proposed that the new institution, offering both technikon and university programmes, would “enhance the effectiveness and the efficiency of higher education in the central Gauteng region” and that this would “contribute to meeting the human resource needs of the region” (Ministry of Education, 2002, 17). In addition:

- Existing programme strengths were seen to be complementary;
- The combined student profile would be more equitable;
- Staff development at TWR would be facilitated;
- Incorporation of the two Vista campuses would provide access to “more extensive vocational and technological programmes” (2002, 18) for those communities.

6.1. Implementing the merger

The establishment of the University of Johannesburg went through two phases. In January 2004, the two Vista campuses were incorporated into RAU. TWR was an observer, with full participation rights. In the second phase, RAU and TWR merged, with a principle of equal partnership and extensive co-ordinating mechanisms and planning. The University of Johannesburg became a reality on 1 January 2005.

Although there were challenges in both phases, HEMSG was told that the incorporation of the Vista campuses raised more difficulties than the merger between RAU and TWR. Many Vista staff felt they should have been equal partners and felt victimised by the more powerful RAU. They had revised their curricula and felt their staff and student profiles were more representative of South Africa; they resented the dominance of Afrikaans at RAU. Some RAU staff felt they were taking on a burden.

The new UJ had five campuses and enrolments of over 45 000. At the time of the merger, two of the campuses offered technikon programmes and three university ones which eased the transition. The Vice-Chancellor and executive team wanted each campus to have a few

flagship programmes to provide clear niches and identities. Sometimes this happened naturally because of an existing strength, but at other times, some reorganisation was required.

A college structure was considered, but rejected in favour of a faculty structure. Given that nine faculties were established out of six from RAU and four from TWR, some reorganisation was required, but it does not appear to have been overly contentious in most cases. UJ decided to have only one curriculum for the same UJ qualification and, if duplication on more than one campus was unavoidable, that had to be fully justified.

Some campuses were unpopular. The Doornfontein campus was regarded as unsafe and difficult to access. There was also prejudice against the Soweto campus, even from people in the area, who reportedly preferred to come into Auckland Park for various reasons, including status. The East Rand campus had seen student numbers dwindle and it was temporarily closed. Permanent closure was reported to be subject to complicated negotiations with various government departments.

Over the course of the study, upgrades to the various campuses lessened opposition and helped to form a new image for UJ. In the case of the Soweto campus in particular, the opportunity was taken to develop an exciting new identity and large amounts of money were invested (in 2008 R300 million from the Department of Education and R250 million from UJ's own funds). Funds were also allocated to upgrade the Doornfontein campus and, at the time of HEMSG's last visit, a decision to locate engineering and health sciences there appeared to be generally accepted.

The Vice-Chancellor and the executive wanted UJ to become part of an "expanded first team" of research universities in South Africa and to find a unique niche, rather than trying to duplicate

other universities', especially close neighbours, missions. Deans and other members of the university leadership were urged to benchmark themselves against external indicators rather than looking inwards, which was perceived to be a practice of the past (certainly at RAU).

Over the early years of the merger, an almost entirely new executive was appointed, with several further changes before there was stability. Only one member of earlier management remained, which had both pros and cons. The time that it took for the new executive to be appointed was unsettling for staff and delayed important decisions. In one instance at least, prior decisions about structures were overturned and this caused unhappiness, especially since the process had been previously agreed and was reasonably inclusive. By the time of the second visit, the situation had become more settled. The Vice-Chancellor reported that, while the executive had provided strong leadership initially, the intention was to devolve decision-making to the Deans.

Some of the new deans were appointed from outside the merging partners and they all seemed to think this had been to their advantage because they came with no preconceptions and were often received more openly.

Membership of Senate would have been skewed towards RAU if only professors were members. In order to deal with this disparity, heads of departments also became eligible to be members of Senate. Unlike other large universities formed through mergers, HEMSG heard no complaints about the composition of Senate.

Each of the institutions had very different histories – language, programme types, student and staff composition, even management styles (RAU was said to have a more devolved style than TWR's more centralised style) and these played themselves out in various ways. Many people

referred to “hierarchies” in the new UJ. For example, degree studies and academic staff teaching on those programmes were of higher status than those on diploma programmes, Kingsway campus was the dominant campus and most privileged (student leaders noted that this was the “whitest” campus, whereas there were no white students on the Soweto campus). RAU’s ways of doing things were said to predominate. These manifestations of South Africa society were also not uncomplicated - for example student leaders said that many black students referred to themselves as RAU rather than UJ, students.

Language issues surfaced particularly, but not exclusively, in Senate. RAU had conducted its business mainly in Afrikaans and UJ does all its business in English. Translation still occurred in Senate in 2008. As a medium of instruction, HEMSG heard that only a small proportion of students wanted tuition in Afrikaans, with the largest proportion of students now being first language English and isiZulu speakers. Although HEMSG was told that there were attempts to attract Afrikaans-speaking students back to UJ, this could complicate matters if it meant that dual medium instruction would be required.

UJ had developed its own values and these had been accepted by most. A cultural integration project occurred early in 2009. Issues of alienation, identity and feeling undervalued, amongst others, were dealt with. A similar programme took place in the residences, all of which signed a values charter.

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing UJ, as with NMMU, is the coexistence of degrees and ex-technikon diplomas in the same institution. Those teaching technikon-type programmes were unconvinced of UJ’s commitment to preserving these programmes. They were threatened by the policy emphasising research in promotion and the insistence that all staff should have at least a masters degree.

At its second visit, HEMSG heard that attention was been given to serious marketing of diploma study, and this was a positive move. Discussions with staff elicited the view that each area of study had to be seen in its own right – what was appropriate for one area was not appropriate for another. HEMSG supports the continuation of this more nuanced discussion of differentiated programmes and needs.

6.2. Overall evaluation of the merger

By 2008, enrolments for all the faculties seemed healthy, with enrolments for diploma qualifications slightly above the target from the DoE (36% of all enrolments).

As with NMMU, the HEMSG believes that one of the most important problems that remain is the need to protect the diploma programmes and avoid academic drift. UJ is providing enabling programmes to help staff get masters degrees, but none the less, it is clear that this requirement is causing real concern and one wonders if it should be an absolute requirement.

A converse view of the above is that research output has increased at UJ and, even in some of the vocational areas, staff were complimentary about greater possibilities and support for research.

HESMG believes that there is a sense of cohesion and purpose at UJ. Research output is up, as are enrolments. Staff and students told us that, on the whole, folk regard themselves as members of UJ and not of RAU or TWR. It is true that Kingsway has better facilities than any other campus and perhaps it would have been wiser to place the new large building which

houses administration on another campus, to symbolise the equality of the campuses as has been done elsewhere.

Apart from the concerns voiced above, HEMSG believes that UJ has established its identity and is well on the way to meeting the Ministry's goals of the merger as well as its own.

7. General Overview : common trends and conclusions

As each section shows, HEMSG thinks that these four cases of restructuring have been positive, despite unfinished business and identified issues of concern. Goedegebuure's seminal work (1992) provides a way of classifying mergers and their likelihood of success. Yet in South Africa it is not possible to draw common theoretical conclusions, because each case had its own specific goals within national goals and has to be evaluated separately. South African institutions did not initiate the mergers, nor have the opportunity to seek compatible partners, as for example in Australia. None of the mergers was voluntary; all were multi-faceted with multiple goals.

All the South African mergers had to deal with cross-cutting issues such as institutional culture and race, which did not necessarily manifest themselves in the same way. In UKZN, for example, race manifested in many ways (not only in student preparedness); cultural differences were also identified (for example management styles originating from UDW were sometimes characterised as "autocratic"). What could have been the simplest process - UFH incorporating one smaller campus – was complicated by racial and cultural differences and the need for UFH as an institution to re-establish itself. NMMU and UJ were both university / technikon mergers, which, as vertical mergers, were intended to offer students greater choice. Yet, this was complicated because the National Qualifications Framework does not make articulation easy

and both universities wanted to upgrade staff qualifications and research, which could result in academic drift.

Lang (2003, 19-46) argued that the track record for survival of university mergers is better than in the for-profit sector and concludes that the likely success will depend on how realistic the expectations were and the appropriateness of partners. HEMSG thinks that partners were all appropriate in the case studies, although the Vista campuses probably provided undue complications (UJ, however, embraced the opportunity offered by its new Soweto campus). The Ministry of Education did not give precedence to any one goal, as identified by Lang (such as economic efficiency or greater diversity of programmes), because there were elements of several goals in each merger. The mergers were intended to improve higher education provision across the country and each merger has to be viewed in this light as well as its own context.

It is nevertheless possible to draw some general lessons and conclusions from the four case studies.

7.1. Implementing the mergers

While there might have been reluctance or even opposition from some of the initial leadership, by the time new Vice-Chancellors had been appointed, they had put their full weight behind the restructuring and planned to ratchet their institutions to a higher level. They all targeted financial sustainability (especially UFH and NMMU), streamlining and improving administrative systems (especially UFH), and improving research output (especially UKZN which sought to become one of the top research universities in South Africa, and UJ). In merging systems and policies, all used the opportunity to improve wherever possible and all were concerned to build

enrolments. Several obtained additional funding; for example SANTED funded UFH for staff development and administrative overhaul and NMMU and UJ to examine the implications of offering both diploma and degree qualifications.

All faced difficult choices and none felt they had sufficient money from the Ministry. NMMU had to abandon more ambitious plans for faculty re-location as did UKZN. UFH had to find a way of re-engineering the university and using the opportunity an East London campus provided, but balancing the needs of the Alice campus, which was run down.

People in each university said that there should have been more planning, but it is not clear how this could have happened, given that academic activities continued as normal, which gave very short periods for physical moves to take place. Each of the institutions received funding, however, which would not otherwise have been available, to improve physical infrastructure.

In all cases, the universities moved as swiftly as possible to develop frameworks. NMMU, in particular, spent time exploring what it meant to be a “comprehensive” university; so did UJ. Large numbers of people were drawn into committees formulating policy. This inclusive process probably extended ownership of the merger, but at the cost of vast amounts of time from staff, who also continued with normal business. With hindsight, HEMSG wonders whether this overly-democratic process was fair, particularly when work in a committee was sometimes overturned at a higher level and could have been done quicker and less stressfully in a less consultative manner. Additional funding for project managers might have been more cost-effective in the long-run.

All institutions attempted to keep the university community informed through a variety of sources like newsletters and websites. UKZN staff spoke favourably about the roadmaps provided by

the merger planners for example, but student leaders said that these stopped too early after the merger. In all cases people also complained of not being informed properly (despite the overload of information provided); HEMSG thinks that, in the context, the attempts were valiant.

Initial fears about loss of name or “brand”, or of being taken over, reduced over the years. All the universities worked hard at creating and promoting an exciting new identity with events and publicity material and all argued that the money given by the DoE was inadequate to address this matter.

Divisions and stereotypes about new partners tended to remain when people were not brought together. Race was often highlighted in conflict situations, but discussion often indicated that there were underlying management and leadership issues in these situations. Nevertheless, vigilance against racism was required.

7.2. The role of leadership

Visionary leadership seems to have been a vital component for success and each of the Vice-Chancellors provided clear visions for the new universities. Each institution seemed able to identify interesting issues or events which incorporated people (NMMU’s workshops about identify, UKZN’s conference about what it meant to be an African university). Symbolic matters such as the name (usually done through extensive consultation), or the location of the Vice-Chancellor’s office (in both NMMU and UKZN the Vice-Chancellor moved his office to what some saw as the secondary partner) were also important in establishing a new identity. An almost entirely new leadership at UJ was successful in creating a new profile for the university very quickly.

A balance had to be found between leadership, responsibility and accountability in a context where vast amounts of work had to be completed very quickly. All the new Vice-Chancellors provided firm leadership through the merger process, in which harsh decisions were sometimes made. The corollary to this seemed to be that in the earlier phases of all the mergers, people complained that it seemed that only the Vice-Chancellor was able to take decisions. Access to him then became important. The NMMU Vice-Chancellor scheduled informal times when staff could come to see him, but this was not possible in a larger institution like UKZN where people complained about lack of access. Tight control seems inevitable in leading a merger; this management style must, however, also change once the institution starts settling down. Although HEMSG has not observed this phase, maybe the fact that both NMMU and UFH got new Vice-Chancellors after the main work of the merger had been completed allowed a different style to be introduced. This does not appear to have happened at UKZN, where it will be important to devolve responsibility and accountability appropriately.

Leadership at other levels was also important. Each of the mergers had heroes, sometimes unsung, who helped resolve or defuse conflict. UKZN established a unit which helped to deal with conflict and this played an important role. UJ conducted a cultural audit to improve understanding between staff, students and between students and staff. All the HR departments tended to be overwhelmed and noted that they didn't have sufficient time to devote to change management.

Initially, the origins of people in management positions in each institution were noted, with Vista people, in particular complaining about being marginalised (though so did each of the other groups). This counting declined over the years.

Maintaining momentum was important; people were quick to revert to old systems and habits and this was often disruptive.

7.3. Governance and multi-campus issues

All the institutions chose to establish integrated faculties across different sites, which Harman (2002, 110) had observed gave a merger a greater chance of success than a federal form of university governance. UKZN chose to establish a College model and it will remain to be seen whether potential disadvantages will be avoided. The size of the new UKZN also necessitated changes to Senate and, while HEMSG was observing, Senate's authority was queried by academics. This problem was not raised at UJ, however.

Each institution made some choices about faculty composition and location which raised concerns, but HEMSG thinks that this was inevitable given financial and physical constraints. The quicker decisions were made the better; occasions where uncertainty persisted were very demoralising and potentially damaging. Departments that were proactive in accepting a new situation tended to benefit the most. When departments were integrated on one site, people mostly began to work as a unit rather than holding on to old identities. Across all four institutions, several people reported that their departments had been enhanced and could cover a broader range of subject areas because of the merger.

Multi-campus universities pose challenges, not least the travel required when single faculties are created. A paper on Norwegian mergers (Norgard and Skodvin, 2002,) distinguishes between infrastructural networks (the geographical space), organisational networks (which link individuals and work groups in work and organisational systems) and social networks whereby ideas and influences are transmitted through an institution. A perfect situation exists when all

these networks have the same degree of strength. Each of the institutions reviewed was still finding the establishment of balanced networks a challenge and a general question for South Africa remains – when is a campus too far away to be part of a larger whole?

The Norwegian study indicated that it was more expensive to run a network institution than a single campus institution, even when all possible technological aids were used. HEMSG agrees and thinks that the Ministry should consider providing specific additional funding for multi-campus universities.

Campus managers were established by all except UFH, but this function must always be seen as part of a larger whole. How the institution deals with day to day issues for people on distant campuses is important and none of the institutions seemed to have solved this, judging from complaints (although NMMU had the least).

7.4. Conclusions: were these cases of restructuring successful?

Overall, HEMSG thinks that the four cases have been successful and that they have mostly met their own and the national goals set by the Ministry. Whether there will be improvements in the use of resources will be determined only after a longer period. HEMSG thinks that the East London campus of UFH must be developed to its full potential and that it would be counterproductive for the Ministry to retreat from its original vision. Linked to this, however, HEMSG understands that the financial viability of UFH must be secured and that this might involve harsh decisions about staff complements. UFH will also have to raise more of its own funds.

There are some unfinished matters in these mergers. In all cases, salary equity between merging partners was slow to complete; inequities were very destructive. It would have been better for the Ministry to have provided the substantial funding to allow this to happen early. In all cases, consolidation of academic programmes was slow. One Vice-Chancellor said this was a “black box” where it was difficult to intervene. Yet, if there are not serious reviews, a great opportunity will be lost.

At a national level, two important questions concern the access of students and the survival of vocational qualifications.

Generally, though not in all cases, there has been a tendency for admissions criteria to be raised. It will be important for the Ministry to ensure that disadvantaged students retain access.

HEMSG is most concerned about safeguarding vocational qualifications in NMMU and UJ. While the intention is there, this is undermined in several ways, including through the funding formula and the Higher Education Qualifications Framework which does not make articulation easy. Both NMMU and UJ have introduced measures for ex-technikon staff to improve their qualifications and, while this might be attractive to some, it is not always appropriate for others. An undifferentiated requirement for increased research outputs could harm vocational areas. This is further subverted through the lack of clarity about the Further Education and Training (FET) sector qualifications at higher education levels and articulation between FET and higher education. This is not a question for the institutions alone, but requires national attention to goals and the best strategies to increase outputs of diplomates in these areas.

Finally, HEMSG continued to be impressed by the goodwill and commitment of staff and students who operated under very stressful conditions. This allowed the restructuring to be accomplished while students were admitted and taught, and with no significant disruptions.

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