THE NEED FOR CHANGE

On 9 December 2002, the then minister of education, Professor Kader Asmal, announced that the cabinet had approved the final proposals for the restructuring of the institutional landscape of higher education in South Africa. These proposals were the culmination of a wide-ranging consultative process on the restructuring of the HE system that had begun in the early 1990s, and which had produced a rich variety of policy documents and frameworks based on the collective wisdom of HE constituencies and stakeholders. In his announcement, the minister hailed the cabinet decision as “the beginning of a new era for higher education in South Africa.”

It was apparent then that the higher education system was still deeply affected by the legacy of South Africa’s apartheid past. Higher education institutions in South Africa faced democracy in the 1990s encumbered by a leadership that was trapped in the dichotomy of advantage/disadvantage and divided philosophically and experientially by apartheid engineering. It was a leadership that was unable to provide the vision and excitement necessary to meet the knowledge and scholarship challenges of HE in the context of national transformation, globalisation and a developmental state. As a whole, the sector suffered an identity crisis, the effects of poor human capital production levels, fragmentation along race lines, a lack of sustainability and a structural incapacity to meet the rigorous challenges of reconstruction and development.

An assessment of the inefficiency, duplication and inequity in South Africa’s tertiary education system prompted three South African academics in an article in the Cambridge Journal of Economics to describe the system from 1910 to 1993 as a ‘dead-weight structure’, rather than as a ‘capstone’ to South Africa’s educational system. “The university sector’s experience,” the authors contended, “shows that discrimination is not necessarily cheap—not only in the form of foregone development opportunities, but simply in the absolute cost of running a racially segmented tertiary educational system.” Under these circumstances, change was vital for the very survival of the HE sector in South Africa.

Many of the findings of the Cambridge Journal of Economics contributors were echoed independently by the conclusions of the South African National Working Group (NWG), of which I was a member. Set up by the minister in March 2001, the NWG was requested to advise on how the number of HEIs could be reduced. Out of 12 performance indicators and benchmarks developed by the working group to substantively assess the equity, sustainability and productivity of HEIs, the university sector as a whole was able to satisfy only four. These were: student equity, enrolment stability, enrolment size and staff availability. None of the output-oriented benchmarks, such as student graduation rates and staff research publication rates, were met by the sector and, on average, its financial stability and staff equity profile were also found to be below the benchmark. The NWG finally proposed the reduction – by mergers and incorporations – of the number of HEIs from 36 to 21.

This proposal was by no means arbitrary. As its point of departure, the NWG took the emphasis in the National Plan for Higher Education (2001) on the need to ensure the ‘fitness for purpose’ of the South African higher education system. That is, the extent to which the elements constituting the system were suited and equipped to effectively fulfil the teaching, skills development, and research functions which are its raison d’être.

Addressing such problems required not only an examination of the nature of the present educational structures that South Africa has inherited from the past, but the will and commitment to grapple with the problems that such institutions carried with them. Having made its recommendations, the NWG went on to outline three explicit preconditions for the successful implementation of the restructuring proposals. These were:

- the financial commitment of the government
- the political commitment of the government
- evidence of commitment on the part of the institutions themselves - a “willlingness of individual institutions to give up some of their own aspirations in the interests of a well-functioning, balanced, and vibrant system, with diverse institutional missions.”

The minister lent strong support to all preconditions, but particularly the latter, urging all institutions to focus on, and to recognise the opportunity provided by, the restructuring process for the enhancement of institutional efficiency and effectiveness and the national benefits of such restructuring.
THE UNIQUE CONTEXT OF THE UKZN MERGER

The University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) was born out of a merger between the University of Durban-Westville (UDW) and the University of Natal on 1 January 2004.

KwaZulu-Natal is home to 10 million people, 20% of South Africa’s population. It is home to three co-dominant race groups, three co-dominant cultures, and two co-dominant languages (isiZulu and English). Zulus make up 80% of the total population, Asians 8.5%, coloureds and others, 6.5% and whites 5%. Despite this demographic, cultural and linguistic dominance, Zulus remain marginalised in the pursuit and shaping of knowledge as a result of the historic colonial-apartheid ethos that denied most things African.

There is no doubt that KwaZulu-Natal is the melting pot province of the South African aspiration of ‘unity in diversity’ in forging a non-racial and non-sexist South Africa. Zulus in general are very rooted people; rooted in their identity, in their language, in their traditions. They have a long and proud history of nationhood and identity.

CRITICAL PRE-MERGER ISSUES

Clearly, the new South Africa of post-1994 brought a new vigour, hope and confidence among Zulus in reclaiming themselves in their own province in which, at times, they have found themselves second-class citizens, marginalised by the colonial and apartheid-derived dominance of the whites and later by Indians. It is within the context of this historic of dominance and yet marginalisation, that one should understand what the merger of the two universities meant for Africans in general and Zulus in particular in KwaZulu-Natal. The merger meant a process of reclamation, a process of engaging knowledge from their proud history and heritage and an opportunity to participate and empower their fellow human beings in the broader transformation and development of South Africa. The merger meant the unleashing of all the intense but long suppressed notions of being Zulu.

As the merger began, UKZN inherited in general an African staff that was hopeful and optimistic and a white and Indian staff that was to varying degrees angry and fearful. There existed a situation of low trust between the different race groups within and between the merger partners. Most issues in the consolidation of the merger would be roughly interpreted from these differing experiences, perspectives and expectations.

SIZE, STRUCTURE AND GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION

Despite growing support for the merger and/or acceptance of the inevitable, the process faced formidable logistical difficulties. The size of the new institution – 5,000 staff and 40,000 students – as well as its location on five campuses provided enormous challenges for merger planners.

In 2004, following a lengthy process of discussion and consultation, senate and council approved the adoption of a college model as the preferred organisational structure for UKZN. This structure, a first in South Africa, has subsequently been translated into a legal framework when the founding statute of the University of KwaZulu-Natal was gazetted in 2006.

The essential structural features of the UKZN college model are:

- four colleges (consisting of clustered faculties), each headed by a dean or a set of cognate disciplines
- eight faculties (two in each college, headed by a dean)
- faculties constituted by schools, consisting of either a single discipline
- provide the critical mass necessary to compete in the national and international arena

Underpinning the university structures are the following key principles:

SINGLE UNIVERSITY-WIDE FACULTIES AND SCHOOLS, OPERATING ACROSS DELIVERY SITES WHERE APPROPRIATE

In many respects, this decision represents a founding principle that serves to integrate fully not only the two previous institutions, but also the various centres and campuses of the new institution.

DEVOlUTION

The main feature of the college model is that it provides an appropriate structure to facilitate the devolution of core academic administrative functions. By clustering cognate faculties into a smaller number of colleges that can function as operational entities, it is possible to devolve administrative functions from the centre to smaller, more manageable, and more homogeneous functional units that are closer to the sites of delivery.

The model provides more scope for strategic redirection of financial resources, and more flexibility in budgets, with the college heads as the principal budget-holders. Within colleges, management responsibility and accountability is further devolved to faculties, and thence to schools.

The decisions to distribute the academic portfolio across four college heads rather than having a single deputy vice-chancellor, and to devolve central administrative functions to colleges were key to addressing the objectives set out in designing a new organisational structure, and are in line with contemporary practice in a number of leading international institutions. The college model represents a radical departure from the academic governance structures in place in either of the previous institutions and, as such, has served to break down old barriers of entrenched practice and structural divides.
STABILITY AND GOVERNANCE

Even before the effective merger date, it was recognised that appropriate management structures and lines of responsibility would need to be in place to ensure that there was no leadership vacuum, and that an atmosphere of stability and unity prevailed on all campuses. Taking into account the needs of a very large, culturally diverse multi-campus institution, a new interim management structure was designed that gave due recognition to such issues as access, equity, and an enabling organisational culture that underpinned the mission and vision of the university.

As planned, the permanent executive management team that followed on from the interim executive demonstrated a significant degree of continuity. In short, the merger established a single statutory entity which, in academic, scholarly and financial terms, is stronger than the sum of its constituent parts.

LEADERSHIP

Decisive and coordinating leadership proved an essential ingredient for meaningful transformation and the creation of UKZN. Leadership of the council and the executive was essential in setting and effecting the values, ethos, norms and standards of the new university. The relationship of the council and executive with the national department of education proved vital in guiding the merger. Exceptional student leadership was critical to building stability, buy-in and shaping various transformation-related discourses within UKZN. The appointment of a new, young and demographically diverse leadership in the deanship, heads of schools and the senate became crucial as the key tasks of merging faculties, realigning programmes and transforming the curriculum were dealt with. We learned that accountable and directive leadership was more important than collegiality during the early phase in guiding the merger to a success, particularly in a highly contested environment of low trust and inequity. No amount of collegiality could shape and focus such a complex merger in the current South African situation.

LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES

Change in the South African higher education system presents a range of key challenges for university leaders. “In particular, managing meaning is a critical challenge. This involves helping people understand how history speaks to current exigencies. In the case of South African institutions, the quest for equity in the context of chronic historical inequity is an enormously powerful narrative which finds resonance with most South Africans. In the context of such change, leaders need to ask: ‘What information would be helpful in understanding how we got to where we are today?’; ‘What narrative is needed to explain the changing relationships between the institution, its constituents and its external partners?’ It is important that leaders engage with and promote narratives which influence priorities, affirm values, clarify beliefs, challenge behavioural norms and generally enthuse members of the institution.”

Giving an opportunity to all staff to contribute to the formulation of the vision, mission and goals and asking them to participate in the naming of the new university and in the choice of a new institutional logo was critical in securing support for the values of the new institution and encouraging commitment to its re-moulding. Among the key leadership challenges throughout this process was the quest to ensure that communication channels remained open at all times, and that all processes were transparent and inclusive. Also critical was that all participants understood the merits, objectives and ultimate benefits of the restructuring process.

It was also important for the leadership to be seen to make decisions based on the ‘greater public good,’ rather than for individualistic reasons. Reaching out to people, building effective teams and inspiring people encouraged commitment from staff and students. Integral to this was ensuring that the initial planning phase was characterised by extensive ownership by those in the institution. Both universities managed the merging of convocations and communicated with alumni about the implications of the new institution for them. Schools liaison officers worked with potential students and their parents. A student leader was employed as a student governance officer to help students merge their organisations, and establish a new form of student governance.

BUILDING UNITY – “PEOPLE ISSUES”

A multitude of fears and assumptions about the effect the merger would have on individuals and the institution were raised by different sectors within both former universities. For the University of KwaZulu-Natal to succeed in achieving its goal of creating a truly South African university and to be the ‘Premier University of African Scholarship,’ two critical yet irrevocably interlinked processes needed to occur. Firstly, we needed to identify and address the variety of racial and cultural issues and challenges; secondly, definition and form needed to be given to the concept of “a truly South African university” and ‘African scholarship,’ and what these imply for the knowledge and organisational culture imperatives.

This conceptual elucidation needed to be accompanied by the development of clear and effective implementation strategies that, above all, addressed the closer linkage and engagement of the university with communities. Attention to these fundamentals, through, among the many other initiatives, the establishment of offices for organisational culture and student governance resulted in a conflict-free transition.

The stability that marked the transition and birth of the new university had its origins in a number of foundations; for example in:

- the removal of a climate of fear and psychological intimidation that existed in the legacy institutions and giving back freedom and transparency to all members of the university community
- the openness and frequency of discussions held long before the merger date with internal and external stakeholders
- how the interim executive management team, on a day-to-day basis, conducted itself and the affairs of the university with integrity, dignity and respect for equity
- the fact that logistical and academic planning began well in advance of the merger date
- providing a new vision and logo for the university as a unifying identity and compass for all staff and students of UKZN
- ensuring that ‘no staff member would be retrenched’
During the first two years of the merger, as vice-chancellor I visited all campuses on a monthly basis to update staff on the progress of the new institution, to encourage a positive sense of ownership over the transformation process and to build unity between the various campuses. I used these visits to listen, learn and benefit from the wisdom expressed by the many committed members of the university. Individual staff members often expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to stay in touch with the broader developments in the new complex university. These forums became an integral part of organisational ‘intelligence’.

CONTINUING CHALLENGES

Despite many successes, human resources remain the largest outstanding challenge of the merger. The process of populating the new structures in the support sector has proved cumbersome and fraught with difficulty. Progress in addressing key areas such as the harmonisation of uncompetitive academic salaries has been slow and the conditions of service agreed to early in the merger have to be revisited for academic and financial reasons.

We still witness a palpable voluntary segregation among black and white students in lecture theatres, in residences and in social settings. Among staff at the medical school, there are tensions between staff of different racial groups over a perceived lack of transformation. Between black and Indian members of the former Westville campus, there are tensions of the sort that prompted the resignation of a senior executive in 2003 amid allegations that he was being used as a “token black” on an executive dominated by Indian staff. These are highly emotive and at times racialised issues, which present challenges for the building of a non-racial learning environment in the new institution. As South Africans, we are all the beneficiaries of diversity. Our key challenge is to ensure that all members of the university begin to understand and experience what this means in practice.

SUMMARY OF INSTITUTIONAL MERGER ACHIEVEMENTS

- vision and identity
- stable integration into a new institution
- established UKZN as a research-led university
- established the college model at UKZN - a first in South Africa
- transformation achieved at UKZN
- creating an environment conducive to learning
- diversity achieved at UKZN
- governance and operations
- funding

There can be no question that the merger has accomplished the objectives set by the minister. The university has transcended the transient label of ‘merged institution’ and will continue its upward trajectory towards achieving its vision to be the ‘Premier University of African Scholarship’. In a recent visit to UKZN, Minister Pandor said “I would like to congratulate you, your staff and the entire university community for the progress that is clearly evident at the university”.

REFERENCES

4. Ibid. p16.
6. Reference unknown.
8. GNM Pandor, MP, Minister of Education 7 April 2008

For a full report on the UKZN merger see www.ukzn.ac.za/publications/special.asp