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The pains and gains of incorporation: reflections from inside a redeployed faculty

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The restructuring of the higher education system in South Africa forms part of the social transformation process of the South African government. The incorporation of the Bloemfontein campus of Vista University into the University of the Free State (UFS) is also part of this process. The literature reveals that strategic institutional leadership, strong governance and staff participation, together with honesty and trust, are crucial factors in ensuring successful mergers/incorporation. Incorporations have been known to fail due to a clash of institutional cultures. Communication among all parties must be open, transparent and effective, but the human factor can be regarded as the most important aspect of incorporation. This article reports on the findings of a study concerned mainly with the "people issues" within an incorporation process.

Die pyne en winste van inkorporering: besinning vanuit 'n herontplooide fakulteit

Die herstrukturering van die hoëronderwysstelsel in Suid-Afrika maak deel uit van die sosiale transformasieproses van die Suid-Afrikaanse regering. Die inkorporering van die Bloemfonteinkampus van Vista-Universiteit by die Universiteit van die Vrystaat (UV) is deel van hierdie proses. Uit die literatuur is dit duidelik dat strategiese institusionele leierskap, sterk beheer en personeeldeelname tesame met eerlikheid en vertroue, deurslaggewende faktore is wanneer dit kom by 'n suksesvolle samesmelting/ inkorporering. Dit is egter bekend dat samesmeltings misluk het as gevolg van botsende institusionele kulture. Die kommunikasie tussen al die belanghebbendes moet openlik, deursigtig en effektief wees, terwyl die menslike aspek as die belangrikste faktor in samesmelting beskou kan word. Hierdie artikel doen verslag oor 'n studie waarin hoofsaaklik op die menslike aspekte van inkorporering gekonsentreer word.

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The Bloemfontein campus of VISTA University was incorporated into the University of the Free State (UFS) in January 2004 in terms of the Higher Education Act, No 101 (RSA 1997).[1] According to the Report of the National Working Group (DoE 2001: 15), reconfiguration of the institutional landscape of the higher education system was essential if higher education was to rise to the challenges facing South Africa as a developing country. The National Working Group also considered that its proposals for reducing the number of higher education institutions from 36 to 21 would lay the foundation for an equitable, sustainable and productive higher education system of high quality, which would meet effectively and efficiently the country's needs in terms of human resources, skills, knowledge and research (DoE 2001: 16).

In the context of this particular study, the relevant recommendations for the reconfiguration of the higher education landscape for the Free State province entailed that "the Technikon Free State [now known as the Central University of Technology] and the UFS should be retained as separate and independent institutions" and that "the Bloemfontein campus of Vista University should be incorporated into the University of the Free State" (DoE 2001: 22-9). Prof Frederick Fourie, Vice-Chancellor of the UFS, sees the incorporation of the Vista Bloemfontein campus into the UFS as a unique opportunity, ushering in a new era of higher education services to communities in the Free State:

> Our dream is to create a new asset for the province that may, for example, provide learning and training services not currently provided by the two campuses (eg upgrading courses for adults, bridging courses, skills development courses, etc). These are immense needs in this area (*Informa* 2003: 1).

As indicated above, mergers or incorporations entail various types of expectations at the national and the institutional level. The danger, however, is that amid all the changes, the people involved are often forgotten in all the difficult administrative and logistical processes of merging and mixing. The literature makes it clear that mergers often cause great confusion in people's lives and can lead to stress, fear and

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1   The legal framework for mergers and incorporations are set out in sections 20 to 24 of the act.

anxiety. It also provides perspectives on the most important factors which determine the success of any process involving a merger.

1. Perspectives from the literature on merging/ incorporation

Goedegebuure's (1992: 16) definition of a merger may be applied to the situation pertaining to the Bloemfontein campus of Vista University and the UFS when he states that:

> A merger in higher education is the combination of two or more separate institutions into a single entity, in which control rests with a single governing body, and whereby all assets, liabilities and responsibilities of the former institution are transferred to the single new institution.

The Bloemfontein campus of Vista University was incorporated into the UFS in terms of Section 24(1) of the Higher Education Act, No 101 (RSA 1997), and all assets, liabilities and responsibilities of Vista University's Bloemfontein campus were transferred to the UFS. The executive body of the UFS now exercises control over the former Bloemfontein campus of Vista University, now known as the east campus of the UFS. We have made use of the word "merger" in the sense of

> [...] the common or generic term to include all kinds of incorporations and to allow the specific forms of merger to be derived and described from institutional practice rather than from *a priori* definition of what the merger claims to be (Jansen 2002: 16).

The incorporation of the Bloemfontein campus of Vista University into the UFS shares the characteristics of the unitary structure model usually associated with mergers. The existing parties merge into a single body (UFS) with a single central administration. Certain functions and powers may be decentralised, if necessary, but a single identity is essential. In Botha's (2001: 277-8) opinion, the advantages of such a model include greater economies of scale, the elimination of duplication and overlap, and a greater exchange of expertise. The disadvantages of such a model include the possibility of different missions and cultures confounding the merger, a total loss of an institution's identity and culture, and the enormous impact on staff in various ways.

Several factors can play a role in addressing the disadvantages of a merger process and ensuring success, including the following.

• Strategic institutional leadership, strong government and staff participation are crucial factors in ensuring successful mergers among tertiary institutions. In the words of Jansen (2002: 177-8):

> [I]nstitutions that provided clear, open, frequent and honest communication to all staff were able to rely on this support base during negotiations. Institutions that ignored their staff not only lost the most talented even before conclusion of the negotiations but found it very difficult to regain the support, interest and motivation of the personnel when attention shifted to the routines of academic and administrative functions.

• Trust is another essential underpinning factor facilitating change in higher education. Devine (1999: 5) emphasises that leaders need to be aware of the crucial role which honesty and trust play in any change process. Effective leaders are honest and do not make false promises. They give as much information to their staff as possible and are open and honest about the limits of their own knowledge. This attitude, according to Devine, has a positive effect on their employees, who feel that they are better equipped to make decisions about their future.

• The most common cause of failure in a merger process is that competing cultures do not manage to come together. In the words of Harman & Meek (2002: 3):

> [I]t is clear that where culturally different institutions are brought together, expert leadership is needed in order to keep damaging culture conflict to a minimum and to develop within the newly created institution new loyalties, high morale and a sense of community.

In the same vein, Harman (2002: 99) warns that managing the cultural dimensions of mergers is an extremely important element in helping to ensure integration, create a sense of loyalty to the new institution and address the likelihood of high levels of conflict and stress.

• Communication between all parties, particularly stakeholders, must be open, transparent and effective. Even in a small merger, communication is not as straightforward as it may first appear (DfES 2003: 35). According to Ivancevich *et al* (2002: 30), it is essential that the leadership of the receiving institution send letters to employees pro-

viding as much accurate information as possible about the merger and its impact on them. The image of the receiving institution as perceived by employees is crucial to the success of the merger. Ivancevich *et al* (2002: 30) state:

> [I]f employees view the acquiring company as having a low regard for the employees of the acquired firm, the integrity of the organisation may suffer greatly. An honest, empathetic communication plan greatly enhances the image of the acquiring company.

• Another aspect concerning staff in a merging process is the reconciliation of potentially different human resource systems, *eg* grievance procedures for both staff and students, and the harmonisation of promotion standards and processes. In the words of Fielden & Markham (1997: 6):

> [H]armonisation and the levelling-up of terms and conditions of service is a significant and long-term cost and will become more difficult and costly as institutions become more differentiated in the terms and conditions they offer their staff.

From the above it is clear that the way in which the human aspect is treated influences the entire incorporation process. So-called "people issues" are highlighted by many authors as the most important aspect of the merging exercise. Price (1999: 39) states that executives involved in mergers

> [...] ignore the people issues to their peril [...] issues of culture, values, behaviour and working styles should be carefully managed from the very beginning of the process.

Greengard (1997: 53) believes that the cultivation of a new culture, effective communication and cohesion are among the key people issues which come to play during a merger. As far as Bruckman (2000: 10-1) is concerned, these issues include another important merger-related aspect, namely loss of loyalty among employees who view themselves as the "losers" in the merger process.

In applying the theory to practice, it would be valuable to determine how staff involved in the incorporation process under investigation experienced the leadership and management of the process, and how communication, cultural integration and handling of other "human" issues were perceived. The outline and findings of an empirical investigation which focused on these and related aspects, are presented below.

2. Purpose of the study

This article reports the outcomes of a study concerned with the people issues in an incorporation process. It was aimed at eliciting responses from the "redeployed", *i e* those employees who had belonged to the incorporated institution. Many relevant questions arise. How do staff really feel about the incorporation and the leadership they have ob-served? What are their fears and frustrations, their hopes and expecta-tions? Do they feel like "losers", or do they ultimately experience more gain than pain? How do their experiences relate to those described in the literature? Does it make any difference that the context is purely South African, that the script is the National Plan for Higher Education, and the players a selected group of redeployed academics from a small institution? The overarching purpose of the study was therefore to gain a better understanding of the feelings and emotions of the people most affected by the act of merging or incorporation. Their views may serve to guide the institution involved, as well as other institutions still to embark upon this process.

3. Research design

The empirical part of the study reported in this article adopted a basic exploratory investigative approach and aimed to reveal the perceptions of members of a specific faculty on the Bloemfontein campus of Vista University before and after the incorporation into the UFS in January 2004. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed. Data collection took place in November 2003 (pre-incorporation), with follow-up surveys in March 2004 and February 2005 (post- incorporation). In a purposeful approach to sampling, questionnaires were given to all 13 academic staff members belonging to the five departments of one faculty on the Vista campus. The 11 questionnaires rerturned (an 85% response rate) can be regarded as representative of the faculty. The majority of the respondents were female (64%) and tenured (73%), as well as having between five (27,3%) and 10 years (27,3%) of service. The largest of the ranking groups was lecturer A (64%).

Data collection was directed by the experiences of the first author as an "insider-observer" in the faculty concerned. Her observations, as well as many informal discussions with members of the target group,

also informed the construction of the three questionnaires. In the first survey (November 2003), the perceptions of staff members were tested by means of a series of structured and open-ended questions. In the post-incorporation surveys (March 2004 and February 2005), only open-ended questions were asked and the respondents had to provide answers based on their own feelings and interpretations of the incorporation. The first author furthermore relied on her own observations as a means of testing the trustworthiness of the data obtained, while follow-up interviews (mostly informal in nature) served as "member checks" and contributed to the credibility of the study.

4. Perceptions of staff members regarding the incorporation process

The discussion in this section is divided into two sections. The findings of the pre-incorporation survey are presented in the first section and those of the two post-incorporation surveys in the second.

4.1 Findings of the first survey

The underlying purpose of the questions/statements in the first survey was to gain a general understanding of the perceptions of faculty members regarding the pending incorporation. By November 2003 a number of meetings had been held between the task teams of the two institutions, and the statements presented in the questionnaire were based on observations made by the researcher regarding the decisions taken at these meetings, as well as on general conversational trends relating to the issue of the pending incorporation. The idea was thus to obtain a general understanding of pertinent issues relevant to faculty members.

Much of the discussion in this section relates to the summary of the results of the first questionnaire in Table 1. The respondents had to rank the statements using a five-point scale ranging from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree". For the purposes of this discussion, the "Strongly disagree/Disagree" responses are grouped together; the same applies to the "Strongly agree/Agree" responses. The average rating of each statement is also supplied. By means of these statistics the general perceptions of the staff members may be simply communicated.

Table 1: Respondents' perceptions of the pending incorporation (N=11)

	Statements/Ratings*	SD/D	N	A/SA
	Leadership/management			
1	Management of Vista University-Bloem-fontein campus looks after my interests	8(2 + 6) 73%	1 9%	2(2 + 0) 18%
2	Proper consultation has taken place between myself and management on the entire incorporation process.	7(2 + 5) 64%	1 9%	3(3 + 0) 27%
3	Members of the task team are capable of looking after my interests.	6(0 + 6) 55%	1 9%	4(4 + 0) 36%
4	Management has always played open cards with the staff of the Bloemfontein campus.	10(5 + 5) 91%	1 9%	0 0%
	General matters			
5	Positive changes are taking place within the higher education environment.	4(3 +1) 36%	1 9%	7(5 + 2) 64%
6	Personnel needs are being sufficiently met.	8(0 + 8) 73%	1 9%	2(2 + 0) 18%
7	At the date of the incorporation, all staff are assured of employment in terms of their existing contracts and they retain their existing conditions of service.	1(1 + 0) 9%	0 0%	10(8 + 2) 91%
8	Academic staff have less to fear from the incorporation than administrative staff.	1(0 + 1) 9%	4 36%	6(4 + 2) 55%
9	Administrative staff have less to fear from the incorporation than academic staff.	7(2 + 5) 64%	4 36%	0 0%
10	Junior staff have more to fear from the incorporation than senior staff.	1(0 + 1) 9%	5 45%	5(4 + 1) 45%
	Relationship with new colleagues			
11	Good relationships exist between myself and the department I will be joining on 1 January 2004.	1(1 + 0) 9%	1 9%	9(5 + 4) 82%
12	The colleagues from the UFS regard me as being on the same level as they are.	1(0 + 1) 9%	3 27%	7(5 + 2) 64%
	Future arrangements/expectations			
13	Only Vista staff members should be in-volved in the lecturing of pipeline students.	6(0 + 6) 55%	2 18%	3(3 + 0) 27%
14	Once the pipeline students are through the system, the old Vista campus should close.	7(3 + 4) 64%	2 18%	2(2 + 0) 18%

	Statements/Ratings*	SD/D	N	A/SA
15	Only the programmes currently offered at the UFS should form part of the new academic structures.	6(2 + 4) 55%	1 9%	4(3 + 1) 36%
16	All administrative systems currently used by Vista should be replaced by the administrative systems used by the UFS.	1(0 + 1) 9%	0 0%	10(7 + 3) 91%
17	Quality assurance will improve as a result of the incorporation with the UFS.	1(0 + 1) 9%	2 18%	8(7 + 1) 73%
	Financial matters			
18	I will be financially better off at the UFS.	8(4 + 4) 73%	3 27%	0 0%
19	The benefits offered by the UFS are better than what I am currently enjoying at Vista University.	6(4 + 2) 55%	4 36%	1(1 + 0) 9%
20	Voluntary Severance Packages (VSPs) should be offered to interested staff members before 1 January 2004.	0 0%	1 9%	10(8 + 2) 91%

* SD/D: Strongly disagree/Disagree (ratings of 4 and 5)

  N: Neutral: (rating of 3)

  A/SA: Agree/Strongly agree (ratings of 1 and 2)

4.1.1 Merger versus incorporation

The incorporation of Vista University's Bloemfontein campus into the UFS shares the characteristics of the unitary structure model usually associated with mergers (cf section 1). In an open question the respondents were asked which of the two options they would have preferred, a merger or an incorporation. Nine of the 11 respondents (82%) were in favour of a merger, because it implied equal status for both parties, as indicated by the following two responses:

> I would prefer a merger because with incorporation we are not going to be treated as equal partners in negotiations about, for example, conditions of service. Receiving institution will still have an upper hand over decision-making [...]

and "because it implies equal status". These negative feelings may be associated with the views expressed in the literature on the enormous impact which mergers have on staff. Clear indications of fear with regard to the loss of identity and power or status (the "loser effect") are

evident. This is especially significant when viewed against the fact that the majority of the respondents are permanent staff members between the ages of 30 and 39 and are thus concerned about their employment opportunities after incorporation.

4.1.2 Management/leadership

Table 1 provides clear evidence of feelings of mistrust in the management structures of both institutions. The responses to statements 1 and 4 reveal that 73% of the respondents had negative perceptions about the role of management in the entire incorporation process, and that 91% felt management had not been playing open cards with them (the very high average rating of 4.4 for statement 4 is also relevant). Furthermore, the general perception seemed to be that the consultation process had not taken place properly, and that members of the task team were not capable of protecting the interests of employees. The aspect of trust, which seems to be missing in the relationship between respondents and management, is relevant here.[1]

4.1.3 General matters

As indicated in section 1, fear and anxiety can be major issues for people whose professional and personal lives may be altered by change, while stress factors such as uncertainty, loss of job identity, job loss or demotion, changes to compensation/benefits, etc due to incorporation play a role in the lives and minds of the redeployed. Statement 5 elicited a positive feeling about the changes taking place within the higher education environment from 61% of the respondents (with 36% in disagreement), but the response to statement 6 reveals that 73% felt that personnel needs were not being adequately met. However, the positive response to statement 7[2] indicates that the general perception revealed in statement 6 may be attributable to fears other than "job loss". In response to statement 8, 55% of the respondents agreed that academic staff had less to fear from the incorporation than administrative staff,

1   In the literature review it was indicated that trust is an essential underpinning factor relating to change in higher education, and that the most vital means of success is to be open and honest with employees.
2   "At the date of the incorporation, all staff are assured of employment in terms of their existing contracts and retain their existing conditions of service".

while in response to statement 9 (a control question), 64% of the respondents disagreed with the statement that administrative staff had less to fear from the incorporation than academic staff.

4.1.4   Relationship with new colleagues

The image of the receiving institution as perceived by employees is crucial to the success of the incorporation. In this regard, positive elements of the pending incorporation are indicated in the responses to statements 11 and 12, and particularly through the apparently positive collegial relationship between colleagues at Vista and the UFS, as experienced by 82% of respondents at the departmental level. The respondents generally seemed to have positive relationships with their soon-to-be UFS colleagues. This finding again emphasises the importance of relationship-building, as well as the facilitation of communication between different groups in the institutions and the exploration of their ways of thinking and operating. Another positive finding was that seven of the 11 respondents (64%) agreed/agreed strongly with statement 12.[3] This is an important aspect, as the literature indicates (cf paragraph 1) that where employees view the acquiring institution as having low regard for them as employees of the acquired one, the integrity of the organisation may suffer greatly. From the literature it also became clear that an honest, empathetic communication plan greatly enhances the image of the acquiring institution. For this reason it is important to take note of the feelings of the four respondents who did not react positively to the statement.

4.1.5   Future arrangements/expectations

Most of the respondents also had clear views on the future of the Vista campus, its staff and its students. In response to statement 13, 55% did not agree that only Vista staff should be involved in lecturing pipeline students, while 64% did not agree that once the pipeline students had passed through the system, the old Vista campus should close down (statement 14). In terms of statement 15, six (55%) respondents did not agree that only the programmes currently offered at the UFS should form part of the new academic structure (while four agreed). These responses

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3   "The colleagues from UFS regard me as being on the same level as themselves".

indicate a general feeling that not everything emanating from Vista University should be totally discarded after incorporation, but that the better aspects of Vista University should be retained at the UFS. Such an approach could lead to the building of a sense of loyalty and a common culture. However, the majority of the respondents (73%) agreed that quality assurance would improve as a result of the incorporation with the UFS (statement 17), which can be interpreted as a deficiency identified by Vista staff regarding quality assurance. Along the same lines, 10 of the 11 respondents (91%) agreed (average rating a low 1.9) that "all administrative systems currently used by Vista should be replaced by the administrative systems used by the UFS" (statement 16). This may be interpreted as an expectation that administration will be superior at the new UFS.

4.1.6   Financial matters

The responses to statements 18 and 19 reveal that 73% and 55% of the respondents, respectively, were of the opinion that they would be worse off after the incorporation (as also emphasised by the rather high average ratings of 4.1 and 3.8, respectively). In open responses it was indicated that the decline in financial and other benefits remains a thorny issue and needs to be properly addressed by management. The majority of the respondents (91%) agreed that "Voluntary Severance Packages should be offered to interested staff before January 2004" (statement 20), indicating a feeling that people should not be forced to stay if they preferred to leave before the date of incorporation.

4.1.7   The greatest fear/frustration resulting from incorporation

In an open-ended question, the respondents were asked to state what, if any, their greatest fear/frustration was regarding the pending incorporation. Some of the responses support the above. It seems as if inadequate communication regarding the incorporation was provided by the leadership, as demonstrated by the following two responses: "Vista University has failed to communicate to its employees, crucial information, *eg* conditions of service, of the new institution. I only know about provisional arrangements for 2004; what about 2005 and beyond?" and "not receiving information and decisions in writing". This did not augur well

for the incorporation, as communication and effective leadership have been shown to be crucial to the success of any incorporation process.

4.1.8   Overview

The first investigation gave an indication of the positive as well as the negative perceptions of staff in terms of the pending incorporation. The strongest feelings, as indicated by the lowest and the highest average ratings respectively (underlined in Table 1), had to do with perceptions about leadership and management (statements 1 and 4); job security (statement 7); a perception that administrative staff have more to fear from the incorporation (statements 8 and 9); relationships with new colleagues (statements 11 and 12); the closing of the old Vista campus (statement 14); the administrative system at the Vista campus (statement 16); the improvement of quality assurance at the UFS (statement 17), and perceptions of financial matters (statements 18, 19 and 20). The positive expectancy of new relationships as well as a great measure of job security was somewhat neutralised by negative experiences and fears/ anxieties. In general, communication was not experienced as open and adequate, while a negative feeling about the role of management in the entire incorporation process was detected. At the time of the first survey, few signs were found of the "them and us" feeling or the "loser" syndrome; rather, there was concern that not everything emanating from Vista should be discarded. It was thus thought to be of importance to undertake another survey or two after the incorporation had taken place in order to determine whether the expectations had been met.

4.2 Findings of the post-incorporation surveys

The purpose of the post-incorporation survey of March 2004 was to establish how faculty members were experiencing the first months of the incorporation and thus whether their expectations (positive or negative) had been met. In February 2005 a similar survey was conducted among the same faculty members. In both surveys specific open-ended questions had to be answered by all the respondents who had taken part in the first survey. For the purposes of this discussion, the findings are divided into positive and negative expectations/experiences, followed by the views of the respondents on their future at the UFS.

4.2.1 Positive expectations/experiences regarding the incorporation

The experiences of the respondents directly after the incorporation were to a great extent aligned with what they had expected, and respondents were generally satisfied with the positive manner in which they had been received by their respective departments, as well as with the continuation of these good relationships in the months after the incorporation. For example, "None better than expectations. Improved work satisfaction in line with expectations". Responses received were also in line with those received to statements 11 and 12 in the first survey, for example: "Good relationship with members of the department. Allowed to carry on doing my own thing. On the non-personnel issues, incorporation went smoothly". and "Our department at UFS has been unexpectedly accommodating". In the February 2005 survey, the same feelings as expressed in the first post-incorporation survey came to the fore. Morale-building and the development of loyalty are of paramount importance and can be a determining factor in successful incorporation. Unfortunately more negative experiences and feelings than positive ones were reported.

4.2.2 Negative expectations/experiences regarding the incorporation and suggestions for improving any unsatisfactory conditions

Five main categories of dissatisfaction were determined in the surveys, namely a lack of sensitivity to cultural diversity; insufficient/lack of communication; expressions of negative attitudes by the UFS; inadequate/insufficient support systems, and academic disparities. The nature of the problems in each category is briefly summarised below, while improvements suggested by the respondents are also included.

• Lack of sensitivity to cultural diversity

Complaints in this category dealt mainly with the language issue: "Communication is in Afrikaans despite the fact that the University and the Faculty know that they have incorporated staff who do not understand the language"; "Insensitivity of the language policy, particularly when it comes to meetings and documentation".

The suggestions of the respondents clearly revealed their frustration: "Communication must be done in a neutral language (English) [added

by authors] whereby every staff member will not feel that he/she is disregarded". It was furthermore felt that "The committee which deals with diversity or language policy queries needs to be transparent and address these issues adequately". One respondent felt very strongly about the matter and stated: "The Minister of Education needs to be informed about these negative aspects of the incorporation". In the February 2005 survey it appears that transformation had not yet taken place as "In this process of incorporation the Minister and her committee should check thoroughly if transformation is taking place in the receiving institution". These comments allow no uncertainty as to the urgency of addressing this burning issue.

• Insufficient/lack of communication

The respondents commented on "continuous lack of communication" and "poor communication between management (main campus) and employees (east campus)", and in particular on "providing up-to-date and on time information". From the February 2005 survey it is clear that openness with regard to communication is still lacking, as one respondent stated: "Give information to staff, on openness on future plans and transparent communication".

The respondents consequently asked for improved communication systems involving the use of "different communication methods and not just one" as well as "once a month meetings between university management and staff at the east campus". Perhaps the following comment says more than it seems: "Let all UFS staff visit and lecture at Vista".

Management's use of the official web page as the main communication mechanism can be seen as a major factor contributing towards the negative perception which the respondents had of management structures. Unfortunately, this issue was also raised in the pre-incorporation phase, and it appears that management did not take cognisance of the objections raised at that stage, as may be seen in this comment: "Lack of transparency of the main campus and the practice of placing important items on the official web page as a fait accompli is regrettable and does nothing towards building a spirit de corps [*sic*]".

• Negative attitude on the part of the UFS

According to a respondent, "[I]t feels as if the UFS is negative about the incorporation and the staff of Vista University". In the first post-

incorporation survey the respondents also revealed signs of the feeling of "them and us" referred to in the literature, with comments such as "Continuation of the 'we know better' attitude is unacceptable" and "University management should start regarding all staff as being equal". In the February 2005 survey it appeared that nothing had changed, with respondents stating that "Management of UFS is disappointing in their obvious discriminating behaviour towards Vista personnel. Not that we did not expect it but not to the extent to which we have experienced it in the past few months" and "Discriminating behaviour by especially the administrative staff towards Vista personnel is unacceptable".

One respondent complained about the lack of visits from heads of departments in the faculty concerned. Another was of the opinion that, in terms of administration, the "hierarchy of authority has increased". This comment must be seen against the background of the responses to statement 16 in Table 1, where the majority of the respondents indicated that the Vista administrative system ought to be replaced after the incorporation.

In their suggestions for improving the situation, the respondents left no uncertainty about their frustrations: "UFS management must realise that we are a dying concern — we do not exist with a back-up or support system any more. They need to make a mind shift. Thereafter their actions will probably improve". Another comment was: "UFS management should consider listening to Vista staff. Stop feeble excuses". From the February 2005 survey it became apparent that not much had been done to bring about a change in attitude: "No suggestions as management does not listen and until they shed their arrogance at both faculty and top management level, conditions will not improve. Furthermore, a lack of respect for status held at Vista renders any discussion with management a waste of time". One respondent even suggested that "Education departments (national and provincial) are accountable to solve the problem".

• Inadequate/insufficient support systems

Several respondents mentioned a lack of technical support after incorporation, and mentioned in particular the "red tape" involved in making photocopies, acquiring stationery, etc. Budget constraints were also mentioned, while one respondent asked: "What were the criteria used in compiling the budget?" Computers and computer problems were

also indicated as sources of concern: "Computers are outdated but main campus receives precedence". And furthermore: "Computer systems cannot handle GroupWise — we cannot perform our basic functions and management (UFS) cannot care a hoot about our problems". A very negative feeling about the whole situation was communicated in the following comment: "Vista is seen as a problem and extra baggage and handled according to this perception".

- Academic disparities

The comments of the respondents revealed uncertainty about the "pipeline" modules in terms of staff "becoming involved on the main campus as well". There was also reference to "organisational disparity in terms of the way modules and assessments are conducted in terms of 'pipeline' modules and UFS practices". Although not exactly clarified, one respondent referred to a situation where "Poor quality students are put at the same university with students who got in through hard work". According to one of the respondents, "an effort has to be made by all parties to place the 'pipeline' modules in perspective and accept that, where necessary, they should be modified, both in terms of course content and assessment".

The above remarks may be linked to the perception of the majority of respondents in the first survey that quality assurance would improve after incorporation (cf statement 17 in Table 1). Whatever the background, there are clear signs of frustration, particularly concerning "pipeline students", and any academic disparity certainly needs to be addressed at the managerial as well as the academic level. It also became clear that one of the common problems encountered in incorporation — a clash of institutional cultures — did exist in this scenario and had to be resolved. In the February 2005 survey one respondent stated: "The University needs to realise that the time for transformation cannot be pushed in the background. Regarding Vista personnel, management does not even make an attempt to accommodate staff but rather practice toleration".

Considering all the above-mentioned categories of concern, it seems that poor communication was once again to blame for the potential derailment of the incorporation process. It is also clear that the UFS needs to investigate all these problems if it wishes to adhere to the most important guidelines of successful incorporation as indicated by

Strydom (1999: 40), namely "a shared vision endorsed by strong leadership" and "strong efforts to build a sense of loyalty and a common culture from the new institution".

4.2.3   Respondents' future at the UFS

The responses to the March 2004 and February 2005 surveys were predominantly the same. Respondents had to indicate where or in which position at the UFS they saw or wanted to see themselves in five years' time. Overall, the responses were favourable with regard to continued employment at the UFS, provided that the right environment was created, for example, "If the conditions of service are satisfactory, I hope to have a permanent position as lecturer/senior lecturer in the department. If unsatisfactory, I will find myself in another organisation". However, there were also unfavourable responses, for example, "Looking at the University today, I hardly see myself in any senior position. I do not see the University committed 'enough' to transformation and specifically address the issues of equity". This aspect highlights the most common cause of failure during incorporation, namely the failed fusion of cultures. Furthermore, "Unless University management makes use of my potential very soon and deploys me according to my abilities, I will not for very much longer, be an employee at UFS. If University management redeploys me, I hope to achieve a senior management position within five years". The aforementioned clearly refers to one of the negative aspects associated with incorporations, namely loss of loyalty from employees who view themselves as the "losers" in the transformation process.

5.   Conclusion

This study has provided evidence that the experiences of the people involved in a merger are universal and that the lessons to be learned from other experiences are highly applicable to the South African situation, as portrayed.

The literature review made it clear that leadership is about coping with change, and that effective leadership is required if transformation — a process of metamorphosis — is to be successful. Leadership is thus concerned with the development of a new institutional culture based on a common set of values driven by a committed and effective

leadership team. Strategic institutional leadership, strong governance and staff participation are crucial factors in ensuring successful mergers, together with honesty and trust. Leadership also needs to manage the culture of the newly merged institution, as the appreciation of cultural differences is a key element of successful leadership in mergers. For any incorporation to be successful, a very personal, culturally aware leadership style is required. Leadership and communication are vital, and communication between all parties must be open, transparent and effective. Communication — on the institutional as well as the faculty/ departmental level — is a decisive factor in building trust and commitment.

In the case of the UFS, it seems that communication channels need to be more personal and less web-based, with the implementation of interpersonal communication methods by management structures on all levels. The building of a sense of loyalty and a common culture should be of paramount importance to management structures. These structures need to announce their plans for the former Vista campus and for the future of staff currently operating at that campus as soon as possible, if the stressor factors relating to the people involved in the process are to be limited. Manifestations of alarming "them and us" feelings and the "loser" syndrome have to be opposed in a very pro-active way.

A merger may give employees opportunities for advancement, but the opposite could equally well be the case. According to a manager in Roffy Park's research (Devine 1999: 3): "I used to be allowed on the bridge and occasionally to touch the wheel. Now I am down in the boiler room stoking coal". Is this also true for many of the former employees of the Vista campus?

After experiencing some of the "pains" and "gains" of incorporation, this study has fostered in the researchers a better understanding of the argument of Scott & Low (1996) that, for leaders to manage transformation processes effectively, the acceptance of a number of assumptions is crucial: that change is a process and not an event; that it is value-laden and reciprocal; that it must be owned, and that it must be led. One can only hope that in these difficult circumstances the "dream" of creating "a new asset for the province" will somehow come true.

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