

Creating an African university

On 9 December 2002 former Minister of Education Professor Kader Asmal announced that the cabinet had approved the final plans for a far-reaching restructuring of the institutions of South African higher education. These plans included a series of mergers and incorporations which would see the number of institutions reduced from 36 to 21.

For the universities of Natal and Durban-Westville, which were among those due to merge on 1 January 2004, the December 2002 announcement confirmed what had been widely anticipated and had the effect of galvanizing the planning processes already under way. While the universities of Durban-Westville and Natal had been positioned on opposite sides of the divide between historically advantaged and disadvantaged institutions, they had comparable mission statements and offered similar academic programmes in the Durban area on campuses less than 10 km apart. In addition, voluntary steps had already been taken by educational institutions in the province towards formal regional collaboration, which had culminated in the formation of the Eastern Seaboard Association of Tertiary Institutions. Under these circumstances, legislation for some kind of unification of the institutions was not unexpected.

This did not mean that the merger did not have its critics – among both staff and students. Mass meetings with students and staff of all campuses of the former University of Natal, chaired at the time by acting University of Natal vice-chancellor David Maughan-Brown before the official merger announcement, reflected a number of concerns. Among staff, there were fears of retrenchments, about the effect of the merger on academic quality and there was some outrage at what was seen as the double standards involved in a government policy which left historically white institutions such as Wits and UCT relatively untouched.

Students at the former University of Natal were also concerned about a drop in academic standards and raised concerns about the politicised nature of UDW and its history of disruptions and boycotts. Some students expressed the view that there had been insufficient consultation about the merger, and showed some frustration at what they perceived to be their university administration's capitulation to political pressure.

At Durban-Westville there was a strong fear that the University of Natal, being the larger partner in the merger, would effect a takeover of UDW, thereby threatening its culture and identity. This fear persisted at various levels throughout the merger despite the signing of a memorandum of agreement by the chairmen of the two university councils, which acknowledged the 'equal partner' status of both merging institutions, and despite an early decision to make the Westville campus the 'headquarters' or official

address of the new institution. The staff and students of the Pietermaritzburg campus also expressed fears about that campus's potential marginalization as a result of the merger process.

Among UDW students, concerns were primarily about access – in some cases entry requirements and student fees at UN were higher than they were at UDW, the latter taking pride in its reputation for providing broader access to students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds.

Managing the concerns of its constituencies became an important focus of the University of Natal leadership. A regular merger newsletter, a merger website and an electronic discussion forum were established in September 2002 in order to keep the university community informed of merger-related developments and to receive staff and student concerns, criticisms and queries about the process.

For his part, the minister declared his official reasons for the merger of the two universities as follows:

1. The need to overcome the apartheid-induced divide between an historically white and an historically black institution;
2. The promotion of staff equity;
3. Ensuring effective use of resources by reducing overlap and duplication in academic programmes;
4. Consolidation of existing academic programmes to enable a wider range of programmes to be offered in response to regional and national needs;
5. Consolidation of the deployment and use of academic personnel;
6. Reducing the impact of unnecessary competition.

In the six months following the official announcement, both universities were expected to submit to the minister their 'preferred name' for the new institution, the names of their nominees for the nine-member interim council that would lead the new institution for the first six months of its life, the official address of the new institution, and assurances that adequate consultation about the merger and related issues had taken place with staff unions and students.

Pre-merger

With the appointment at the end of December 2003 of Cooper as UDW Vice-Chancellor, negotiations between the two institutions intensified at a management level. The vice-chancellors co-chaired meetings between the two executives. These meetings complemented the discussions taking place within the separate institutions and those between the Council Chairs of Westville and Natal – Dr Namane Magau and Dr Alec Rogoff respectively.

One of the first public platforms shared by the two vice-chancellors was the launch in early February 2003 of the public campaign to find a name for the new institution. Guidelines for the new name were outlined and published in the press and submissions to 'make history' were invited from all members of the public, from staff, students and alumni of both institutions. By the end of May, the campaign had attracted over 1 500 individual submissions. However, the ultimate failure of the two institutions to agree on a name resulted in the submission of separate names at the end of June 2003, and nominations for interim council members were also submitted separately.

A series of crises at UDW during the latter half of 2003 – which culminated in a re-

port by independent assessor Bongani Khumalo recommending the dissolution of the UDW council, the stepping-down of Cooper and the appointment of an administrator – meant that the announcement by Asmal of the name of the new institution was delayed until November 2003. In spite of his assessor's recommendations, Asmal chose to allow Cooper to remain in his position until the expiry of his contract on December 31, 2003. Cooper went on to contest the position of interim vice-chancellor of the new institution, losing out to Professor W.M. Makgoba, whose appointment was confirmed by the interim council on 11 December 2003.

As was generally expected, Asmal announced in November that the name of the new institution would be "the University of KwaZulu-Natal". At the same time, he made public the composition of the nine-member Interim Council to be chaired by Dr Vincent Maphai, now head of BHP Billiton SA. The announcement of the name of the new institution paved the way for a second public campaign – this time for the design of a crest, logo and motto to replace those of the former universities. Responses were invited as a part of a competition which would see the winner of the chosen design – Umlazi designer Zaba Ngubane – rewarded with a prize of R25 000. The logo was officially launched by Asmal in February 2004.

Post merger

With the interim council and interim vice-chancellor appointed by December 2003, the new university's birth was a relatively low-key affair. The complicated task of merging the academic functions (creating university-wide single schools and faculties across five campuses), and the relocation of certain faculties, had been deferred until 2005, while matters of governance received priority. Within the first few weeks of 2004, a 17-member interim executive management team was appointed to take the institution through its first six to 12 months and the University Council was constituted on 1 July 2004 under the chairmanship of Maphai. The establishment of the council – the highest governing body in the university – led to the next key appointment on 11 December 2004 – that of Makgoba as vice-chancellor of the new University of KwaZulu-Natal.

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