

**MERGERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: TOWARDS A SURVIVAL KIT FOR
CONSERVING THE SELF**

by

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DECLARATION

I declare that **Mergers in higher education: Towards a survival kit for conserving the self** is my own work and that all the used and quoted sources have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references. I also declare that this work has not previously been submitted for any other degree at any other institution.

Mattheus Eduard Fourie

Date

SUMMARY

Mergers and incorporations are relatively new phenomena in the South African higher education landscape. The unbundling of Vista University, and the subsequent incorporation of VUDEC into the merger between Unisa and TSA, posed a major challenge to all affected employees. This thesis focuses on how these employees experienced the various stages of the incorporation process. A social construction of inner and outer voices heard, shared, and read during the different phases of the incorporation process attempts to describe how to conserve the self in a merger. The aim of the thesis is to build towards a framework for dealing with the human aspect during institutional mergers and incorporations. The thesis consists of a prologue, a series of four manuscripts that report on the experiences of employees during the different phases of the merger process, and an epilogue. Each manuscript focuses on a specific phase or aspect of the incorporation process, with its own research focus, aims, and methodology.

The first two manuscripts reflect on the pre-merger phase. The **first manuscript** reports on employees' preparation for the incorporation. Following a social constructionist grounded theory approach, four participating employees gained the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences of well-being during the pre-merger phase. The manuscript also reports on a wellness development workshop, attended by 35 representatives from various departments and units of Vista University during the pre-merger phase.

The **second manuscript** reports on how employees embraced the VUDEC institutional culture. A case study approach was selected for semi-structured interviews with 17 participants from governance, academic and administrative departments, and post-graduate programmes. By means of content analysis, the institutional culture of VUDEC was captured on the eve of the incorporation into Unisa.

The **third manuscript** focuses on employees' experiences of the four-year transition and implementation phases of the incorporation. This manuscript follows a social identity approach, and through thematic analysis, reports on how 24 participants experienced the four-year implementation of the incorporation process.

The **fourth manuscript** provides an overview of the human side of mergers as depicted in both national and international literature. The aim is to position the current longitudinal investigation and its findings in the broader higher education landscape, and a survival kit for conserving the self in a merger is proposed.

Keywords:

Employees; Higher Education; Human Resources; Incorporation; Institutional culture; Institutional identity; Merger; Merger Syndrome; Psychological well-being

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PROLOGUE

TOWARDS A SURVIVAL KIT FOR CONSERVING THE SELF IN A MERGER – THE ROLLER COASTER RIDE INTRODUCED

INTRODUCTION

Essential to the success of the merger process will be the co-operation and understanding of affected employees. This will be difficult if staff is kept out [sic] the information loop. It is also fair and proper that employees are given as much information and have as much certainty as possible at all times. Ignorance and uncertainty feed rumours and undermine morale more significantly than transparent ‘bad’ news.

(Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 52)

When institutions enter a merger process not only are they challenged with regard to autonomy and institutional culture and properties, their employees become confronted with major career and personal challenges. The disappointing outcomes of numerous mergers and acquisitions have been increasingly attributed to the neglect and mismanagement of human aspects of the process and the stressful and dysfunctional impact that these change events have on the employees involved (Cartwright & Cooper, 1996). Therefore, on hearing the Department of Education’s announcements about the restructuring of higher education in South Africa, I, as a full-time employee in higher education became curious – as well as anxious – as to how the human aspects would be addressed during the restructuring process. This prologue sets the stage for the investigation of the incorporation of employees from Vista University Distance Education Campus (VUDEC) into the merger between the University of South Africa (Unisa) and Technikon South Africa (TSA).

OVERVIEW OF THE MERGER CONTEXT

A romantic encounter

Romantic terminology is often used to describe mergers and the different activities in the merger process. Mergers are metaphorically linked to anticipated marriages that include all the steps of a romantic encounter. Management literature uses metaphors of *marriage* and *family* to explain merger processes, while some authors advise that the *stepfamily* provides merger managers with a useful model (Murphy, 1998). Journal articles reporting on mergers and acquisitions often reflect this metaphorical parallel. Demers, Giroux, and Chreim (2003), for example, titled their journal article *Merger and acquisition announcements as corporate wedding narratives* (p. 223). Institutional marriages tend to make the headlines, especially during the courtship phase, as illustrated by Harper and Cormeraie (1995) who cited the following newspaper headings reporting on mergers: ‘*a marriage to respect sensitivities*’ and ‘*the merger agreement bears the hallmark of a carefully arranged marriage*’ (p. 25).

The honeymoon is short lived

As in most romantic encounters, a harsher reality becomes manifest after the wedding has taken place, and predictions of a potential divorce often follow when the merger partners have barely walked down the aisle. Sleek (1998) warned that some corporate mergers, like marriages, end up on the rocks. Harper and Cormeraie (1995) suggested that it usually takes two to three years for the traumas of a merger to be addressed and it is during this stormy period that institutional marriages often end in divorce, leaving the traumatised children / employees to fend for themselves. Gale (2003) reflected on the merger between two international companies and argued that ‘when [they] first fell in love three years ago, they apparently didn’t receive effective spiritual counselling. A trusted advisor should have emphasized this reality: Corporate marriages can be colossal trouble’ (p. 1). Cartwright and Cooper (1993) argued that ‘many organizational marriages fail to realize the potential synergism anticipated by the “marriage brokers”; the advisors and senior decision-makers who initiated the union’ (p. 328).

People issues: The human side of mergers

People issues seem to be significant in all mergers and incorporations, and by not focusing on the human factor during the merger process, the potential failure of the new merged institution may become a reality (Bechtel & Squires, 2001; Bijlsma-Frankema, 2001). Jansen (2002a) argued that existing explanations for mergers and incorporations in higher education rely mainly on organisational systems theory, with metaphors, illustrations, and principles drawn from ecology and economics. He further argued that the majority of published research on mergers originated in established economies such as those of the United Kingdom, Australia, Norway, and the United States. Recent studies that investigated mergers and acquisitions in higher education, however, seem to shift the focus from economic and financial assessment to the human side of mergers (Harman & Meek, 2002; Jansen, 2002b; Reddy, 2007). Literature on higher education mergers indicates that people issues, which contribute largely to the success or failure in corporate mergers, are equally relevant in mergers of higher education institutions (Reddy, 2007).

Kavanagh and Ashkanasy (2006), in investigating merger processes in three tertiary institutions, reported that the human factor should guide any transformation process. Effective leadership (Kavanagh & Ashkanasy, 2006) as well as communication and participation (Harman, 2000) increase employee trust and foster loyalty in the new institution. These findings are supported by Hay and Fourie (2002) who identified leadership and communication as key human resource elements for successful mergers in South African tertiary institutions. After reviewing mergers in higher education in the United Kingdom between the mid 1980s and mid 1990s, Fielden and Markham (1997) identified possible obstacles that include, amongst others, conflict between institutional cultures and between different educational philosophies and priorities. The relocation of staff and students may lead to the disruption of the academic programme, while the poor quality of the academic programme and staff of the (smaller) incorporated institution may be seen as an obstacle in the merger process.

The unbundling of Vista University, and the subsequent incorporation of VUDEC into the merger between Unisa and TSA, posed a major challenge to all affected employees. This

thesis focuses on how employees from VUDEC experienced the various stages of the incorporation process. A social construction of inner and outer voices heard, shared, and read during the different phases of the incorporation process will consequently attempt to describe how to conserve the self in a merger.

Build-up to the incorporation of VUDEC: 1996 – 2003

In 1996, the National Commission of Higher Education in South Africa recommended that an investigation be undertaken to plan for a single distance education institution. The goal of this institution would be the offering of quality distance education programmes and the co-ordination of the production of resource-based courses and course-material (Human Science Research Council, 1996). The process of consultation, advice, and proposals between 1996 and 2001 culminated in the National Plan on Higher Education (NPHE) which stipulates the framework and mechanisms for implementing and realising the policy goals of the Education White Paper of 1997 (Department of Education, 2001).

Outcome 11 of the NPHE in 2001 proposed the establishment of a single dedicated distance education institution through the merging of UNISA and TSA, and the incorporation of VUDEC into the merged institution (Department of Education, 2001). In May 2001, the Minister of Education appointed a Working Group on Distance Education (WGDE) to advise him on the establishment of a single dedicated distance education institution through a merger that incorporated the above mentioned institutions. As a result various task teams representing the three institutions were established. In their report to the Minister, the WGDE envisaged, amongst other things, an institution which is built on the strengths of the contributing institutions (WGDE Report, 2002).

The Open Learning University of South Africa (OLUSA) was formally proposed by the Minister of Education by way of the merging of UNISA, TSA, and VUDEC, from 1 February 2002. The announcement appeared in the Government Notice No. 23001 of 4 January 2002, following which an Interim Council was appointed with certain powers to appoint an interim management (WGDE Report, 2002). At the end of January 2002, the Minister of Education resolved to retract the Government Notice creating OLUSA and

requested the WGDE to continue its investigation. At its meeting in March 2002, the WGDE approved a recommendation from the Chair of the Steering Committee and the Merger Managers of the three institutions that an Indaba be held during May 2002. The aim of the Indaba was to discuss the role of distance education in higher education; the vision, mission, philosophies, and niche of the merged institution; various types of unitary models; a process to recommend a name for the institution; and the reports of the Inter-Institutional Task Team (IITT) (WGDE Report, 2002).

The Indaba was postponed to 9 and 10 June 2002 in order to allow the IITT to report substantially on their briefs. On 7 June 2002 the representatives from the three institutions informed the WGDE that they would not attend the Indaba and all the arrangements were cancelled. At its meeting in June 2002 the WGDE resolved that they would present a process report to the Minister reflecting what it had achieved during its term of office and that the WGDE be dissolved on 30 June 2002. It was further indicated that members of the WGDE might be available to assist the process in the future (WGDE Report, 2002).

After the disbandment of the WGDE the Vice Chancellors of the three merging institutions called an Inter-Institutional Merger Forum workshop for October 2002. During the workshop attended by the Vice Chancellors and the Merger Managers, it was agreed that the three institutions, led by their Vice Chancellors, were committed to working together to make the merger successful. Careful planning as well as conceptual and strategic work were emphasised as ingredients for a successful implementation of the merger plan (Merger Managers, 2003).

The incorporation phases

The implementation date for the merger between Unisa and TSA and the incorporation of VUDEC was scheduled for January 2004 and the three institutions agreed, according to Merger Managers (2003) that the merger process would consist of three phases:

- Pre-merger or planning phase: October 2002 to December 2003;
- Transition phase: January 2004 to December 2005; and

- Merger plan implementation phase: January 2006 to January 2008.

Vista University: A brief overview of the history of the institution

Before continuing the discussion of the incorporation, let us briefly consider the history of VUDEC, a sub-division of Vista University. As an institution of higher education, Vista University consisted of VUDEC, a central administration campus, and seven contact campuses in urban black townships, including Mamelodi, Soweto, Daveyton, Sebokeng, Welkom, Bloemfontein, and Port Elizabeth (Bakker, 2007). VUDEC was the first established campus of the eight campuses of Vista University's multi-campus functioning structure, with the purpose to offer diploma and certificate courses to urban black practising teachers to enable them to upgrade their qualifications with a view to possible entry into graduate studies (Vista University Calendar, 2003). Table 1 provides a timeline depicting the twenty one years of Vista University's existence.

Table 1. The history of Vista University*

Date	Event
1978	The Government appointed a commission of inquiry to investigate the tertiary needs and requirements of urban black people in South Africa
1980	The Commission submitted its reports to Government, proposing the establishment of Vista University
1982	The new institution came into being on January 1, 1982 in terms of Act 106 of 1981
1982	In April 1982, The Vista University Further Training Campus with fifteen staff members was established in Pretoria, taking over the function of teacher education from the then Department of Education and Training
1998	The name of the campus was changed to Vista University Distance Education Campus (VUDEC)
2003	In December, Vista University became unbundled

* Information adopted from the Vista University Calendar (2003)

During its 21 years of existence, Vista University underwent a range of transitional changes, reflecting the changes in society and the political situation in the country as a whole (Bakker, 2007). Seepe (2003) argued that the institution's management, ethos, vision, and mission were transformed the coming of democracy around 1994/1995, so that it developed a strong African community-centred identity. In preparing for the incorporation, the VUDEC Merger Manager, Linington (2002), advised:

An important starting point is to BELIEVE: In Vista, in your campus, in your programmes, in our [Vista's] contribution to higher education [HE]. Thereafter to embrace the merger as a means of bringing about a change in HE, to see it as a window of opportunity to create new, better and transformed HEI's. An important role is to ensure that as a University we flavour the new institutions with our vision and our special values. As a University we are unique and we must carry that with pride in all merger matters. (p. 1)

DEFINITION OF TERMS

In approaching this investigation, it became challenging to find appropriate working definitions for the terms *merger* and *incorporation*. Kay (1997) pointed to the fact that institutional mergers are often interchangeably referred to as acquisition, consolidation, takeover, joint venture, strategic alliance or partnering, which allow for differences in interpretation. I therefore turned to the definitions provided by the Council on Higher Education in the report, *The Governance of Merger in South Africa Higher Education*, compiled by Hall, Symes, and Luescher (2004).

In defining a *merger*, Hall et al. (2004) adopted the definition provided by Goedegebuure (1992, p. 16): 'A merger in higher education is the combination of two or more separate institutions into a single new organisational entity, in which control rests with a single governing body and a single chief executive body, and whereby all assets, liabilities, and responsibilities of the former institutions are transferred to the single new institution'.

Hall et al. (2004) acknowledged the difficulty of finding a good general definition of *incorporation* in the South African Higher Education context, and argue that one definition that might be applicable in principle is Lang's (2002, p. 42) notion of 'transformative acquisition' in which 'one partner absorbs the other but changes substantially as a result'. Hall et al. (2004) concluded that although the definition might express an intention, it would need to be tested in practice.

Institutional culture is defined as a system of shared symbols and meanings (Alvesson, 2002) and refers to the deep structure of an institution as grounded in its values, beliefs, and assumptions held by its members (Denison, 1996). It is about the way members make sense of their experiences in the institution and how they define and interpret the situations they are in, in order to be able to function in a meaningful way (Bijlsma-Frankema, 2001).

According to social identity theory, *social identity* is defined as those aspects of our self-concept in which we see ourselves as being similar to others of our social group (van Dick, Ullrich, & Tissington, 2006). *Institutional identity* – a form of social identity – is defined as the distinctive attributes that employees associate with their membership in the institution (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Strong identification with the institution is generally desirable for the well-being of the institution and its members as highly identified employees derive a high component of their self-esteem from belonging to the institution and working towards its goals (van Dick, 2001).

MY OWN JOURNEY FROM VISTA TO UNISA

I find it relevant to include a short overview of my dual role as employee originally from Vista University and as researcher in this investigation. My journey at Vista University commenced when I was appointed as a full time lecturer in the Department of Psychology at the Port Elizabeth campus in January 1993. During the nine years at the Port Elizabeth campus, I became involved with the undergraduate and honours degree programmes (specifically the research methodology courses), curriculum development, the

establishment of a master's degree in counselling psychology, and with a community clinic on campus.

When the Department of Psychology decided to introduce an undergraduate programme in psychology at VUDEC, and as no official position for a lecturer in psychology existed at VUDEC, a team of lecturers from the various contact campuses took on the additional responsibility of facilitating the psychology programme at VUDEC. In January 2001, the programme was implemented, and the first year modules in psychology were offered to distance learners. During the second part of 2001, I became the coordinator of the psychology programme at VUDEC. At that stage, there was still no full-time position for a lecturer at VUDEC, and in January 2002, I was transferred to the Mamelodi campus in order to be physically closer to the VUDEC campus in Pretoria. During that year, while being a full-time lecturer at the Mamelodi Campus, I continued with the implementation of the second year modules at VUDEC. Fortunately, in 2002, a full-time position was established for a lecturer in the Department of Psychology at VUDEC. In January 2003, I became the first – and last – full-time employee in the department at VUDEC, with the primary responsibility of implementing the third year modules, while preparing the curriculum, students, and myself for the incorporation into Unisa.

My involvement with the distance education component of the department and the subsequent physical move from Port Elizabeth to Pretoria coincided with the direction that my personal life was taking. Although the couple of years prior to the incorporation was characterised by rumours and uncertainties about the direction that Vista University would take during the restructuring of the higher education landscape, it was my wish to become a member of Unisa. In January 2004, as the only lecturer in the Department of Psychology at VUDEC, I became officially incorporated into the Department of Psychology at Unisa. Of note is the fact that psychology as subject was only offered to undergraduate students at VUDEC over the course of three years prior to the incorporation, which most probably added to a much smoother transition.

It was during the months prior to the incorporation that I decided to embark on a longitudinal investigation of the incorporation process, with a specific focus on how the process would impact on employees from VUDEC.

RESEARCH FOCUS AND AIMS

What follows is a roller coaster ride of emotions, conversations, reflections, and explorations of theoretical frameworks in an attempt to unpack the experience of employees from VUDEC during the incorporation into the Unisa–TSA merger. In the following chapters, a series of four manuscripts reports on the longitudinal investigation of the experiences of employees from VUDEC during the different phases of the incorporation process with the aim to build towards a framework for dealing with the human aspect during institutional mergers and incorporations. Each manuscript focuses on a specific phase or aspect of the incorporation process, with its own research focus, aims, and methodology. All four manuscripts have been prepared according to the editorial guidelines of the *South African Journal of Psychology* (except for the general length of each manuscript, which always poses a challenge).

The first two manuscripts reflect on the pre-merger phase. The first manuscript: *Marching up the hill: Employees prepare for an institutional incorporation* reports on employees' preparation for the incorporation. Following a social constructionist grounded theory approach, four participating employees gained the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences of well-being during the pre-merger phase. The manuscript also reports on a wellness development workshop, attended by 35 representatives from various departments and units of Vista University during the pre-merger phase.

The second manuscript: *VUDEC embraces its institutional culture on the eve of the incorporation into Unisa* reports on how employees' embraced the VUDEC institutional culture. A case study approach was selected for semi-structured interviews with 17 participants from governance, academic and administrative departments, and post-graduate programmes. By means of content analysis, the institutional culture of VUDEC was captured on the eve of the incorporation into Unisa.

The third manuscript: *The changing higher education landscape: Establishing a new identity during an institutional incorporation* focuses on employees' experiences of the four-year transition and implementation phases of the incorporation. This manuscript follows from a social identity approach, and through thematic analysis, reports on how 24 participants experienced the four-year implementation of the incorporation process.

The fourth manuscript: *A critical review of the human side in merger literature: South African higher education 1998–2008* provides an overview of the human side of mergers as depicted in both national and international literature. The aim is to position the current longitudinal investigation and its findings in the broader higher education landscape, and a survival kit for conserving the self in a merger is proposed.

Finally, the epilogue provides an overview of the investigation and concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the investigation and recommendations for future research.

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MANUSCRIPT 1

MARCHING UP THE HILL: EMPLOYEES PREPARE FOR AN INSTITUTIONAL INCORPORATION

Mergers and incorporations of institutions in higher education have a devastating effect on the emotional and professional lives of employees. In this study the merger syndrome, a nine stage sequential model of employees' emotional reactions during a merger or incorporation, is used as a theoretical foundation for co-constructing the experiences and psychological well-being of employees from VUDEC during the months prior to the incorporation into the Unisa and TSA merger. By following a social constructionist grounded theory approach, participating employees gained the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences of well-being during the pre-merger phase. It soon became apparent that the interventional nature of the interviews formed an integral component of the emerging theory of well-being.

Keywords: communication; institutional culture; institutional incorporation; mergers; merger syndrome; psychological well-being; social constructionist grounded theory

The way in which employees experience an institutional merger process shapes the climate and culture of the new emerging institution. However, it seems human resource weaknesses are commonly found in a typical merger process. Amongst others these include the neglect of psychological issues and inadequate consideration of the psychological effects of change on people (Mercer, 1993). The distinction that has developed between hard and soft merger dimensions separates the impact of the merger on the individual from its institutional impact, thus distinguishing what happens to people from what happens to the institution (Cartwright & Cooper, 1993). In investigating how mergers affect employees, Hubbard (1999, cited in Collins, 2005) identified four main concerns that cause high levels of stress

and uncertainty amongst employees. These include employees' own job security; the well-being of the work group and colleagues; change in role, procedures, and status; and concerns about changes in the institutional culture. If the human elements, the 'soft' people issues (Botha, 2001) are neglected and preference is only given to 'hard' dimensions such as business, financial fit, organisational processes, and structures, fatal consequences for the merger partners may follow (Bechtel & Squires, 2001). De Voge and Spreier (1999) asked: 'if people are our greatest asset, why are they ignored in the rush to merge and acquire?' (p. 27).

The merger syndrome: Towards establishing a theoretical foundation

Buono and Bowditch (1989) identified institutional merger processes as consisting of seven stages, namely pre-combination, combination planning, announced combination, initial combination process, formal physical-legal combination, combination aftermath, and psychological combination. Astrachan (1990) proposed the *merger syndrome* as a further stage as the reality of a merger sets in. This usually occurs when employees become unsettled, rumours abound, disenchantment and dissatisfaction deepens, chaos begins, and unplanned consequences emerge. Theorists note that each stage in the merger process may not necessarily occur in all situations, with the same intensity, or in the same order (Murphy, 1998).

Most theorists base their investigation into employees' emotional experiences of merger processes on the five stage model of Kübler-Ross (1986). Halpern (1994, cited in Holtzhausen, 1998) based the stages of a *change model* – denial, resistance, understanding, campaign, collaboration, and institutionalisation – on the grief reaction as identified and described by Kübler-Ross (1986). Van der Westhuizen (2004) used *bereavement theory* – Kübler-Ross' five stages of grief reaction – to classify and discuss the emotional stages of college staff experienced during the incorporation of the College of Education into the University of Pretoria. From the accounts of staff involved in the incorporation it became clear that people experiencing major change in their lives need to feel part of the process. Issues such as a loss of confidence and self-worth, a lack of coping mechanisms, and general mismanagement of the incorporation process should be addressed to avoid the

trauma and anxiety experienced by people going through transformational processes (van der Westhuizen, 2004).

Both individuals and institutions seem to have relatively similar patterns of reactions to a merger process (Anderson, 1999). Employees tend to become withdrawn and preoccupied with their own position and survival whereas institutions tend to focus on crisis management. The latter often involves secrecy and centralised decision making that contributes to a negative impact of the merger on employees. Management often exhibits an optimistic attitude towards the merger due to their position of control over the process as well as having more direct access to information. However, employees are usually more pessimistic and often become angry about the change and uncertainty they feel they have little control over.

Several merger stress impact models have been proposed which closely approximate more general models of occupational stress (Cartwright & Cooper, 1993). The psychological response of employees to the announcement of an institutional merger or incorporation has also, according to Cartwright and Cooper (1990), frequently been compared with the sense of loss experienced following the bereavement of a relative or close friend. The merger response has therefore been placed within the framework of the Kübler-Ross model of bereavement (see van der Westhuizen, 2004). It is postulated that employee reactions progress through four stages, namely (a) disbelief and denial, (b) anger through rage and resentment, (c) emotional bargaining beginning in anger and ending in depression, and (d) acceptance of the situation (Cartwright & Cooper, 1990).

Based on this model, Hunsaker and Coombs (1988) identified a nine stage sequential model of employees' emotional reactions during a merger or incorporation. The model describes what has come to be known as the *merger-emotions syndrome* (See Table 2 below).

Table 2. The nine stage sequential model of employees' emotional reactions – The merger-emotions syndrome*

Stages	Emotional Reaction	Brief description
One	Denial	Employees feel that the merger will not really happen or that it will not change their work or organisation
Two	Fear	Employees begin to fear the unknown and to imagine the worst
Three	Anger	Employees express anger towards those responsible for the merger
Four	Sadness	Employees begin to grieve the loss of their institutional identity and focus on the differences between the institutions
Five	Acceptance	After a sufficient mourning period has elapsed, employees start to accept the reality
Six	Relief	When the integration is in operation employees begin to feel more settled in the new institution
Seven	Interest	As employees become more settled they begin to consider the benefits of the new institution
Eight	Liking	Employees identify new opportunities and begin to like their work
Nine	Enjoyment	Finally, employees become committed to their new institution

* Adapted from Hunsaker & Coombs, 1988, p. 58

Marks (1999) viewed merger syndrome as 'the perfectly normal and expected human reaction to experiencing such a major corporate change' (p. 28). Pikula (1999) is of the opinion that management should recognise that these emotional stages exist among employees and deal with them as expeditiously as possible. After studying more than fifty organisational mergers and acquisitions over a period of fifteen years, Marks and Mirvis (1998) postulated the merger syndrome as consisting of increased centralisation and decreased communication by management with employees. This leads to executives'

stressful reactions, the development of crisis-management orientations, and the clash of institutional cultures – seen as systems of shared symbols and meanings (Alvesson, 2002) that refer to the deep structure of institutions as grounded in its values, beliefs, and assumptions held by its members (Denison, 1996) – in combining institutions (Marks, 1997). The decrease in top-down communication leads to heightened self-interest that result in employees becoming more focussed on themselves, their income, and their careers (Marks, 1999).

If institutional communication is not addressed properly it can lead to a reduction in productivity and an increase in employee absenteeism, eventually resulting in an unsuccessful merger or acquisition (Appelbaum, Gandell, Yortis, Proper, & Jobin, 2000). Marks (1997) is of the opinion that merger syndrome arises even when merger partners take some care to introduce a thoughtful integration designed to minimise upheaval and provide for its effect on people.

‘What determines whether one has the ability to respond to stressful or traumatic events not with despair, depression, and purposelessness but with resilience and a renewed sense of purpose?’ (Taylor, Kemeny, Reed, Bower, & Gruenewald, 2000, p. 106). Christopher (1999) argued that an understanding of psychological well-being may be a key requirement for human existence.

Psychological well-being

Around the turn of the millennium a strong scientific interest in the nature and dynamics of psychological well-being seems to have emerged (Wissing & van Eeden, 2002), which focuses on what Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) referred to as *positive psychology*.

A wellness model provides a framework for operationalising the aim of holistic human development in a variety of settings (Olivier, de Jager, Grootboom, & Tokota, 2005). Antonovsky (1991) argued that some individuals cope quite well and stay healthy despite numerous stressors in everyday life as well as when being subjected to traumatic experiences. He introduced *salutogenesis*: the origin of health (Antonovsky, 1991), which

focuses on the individual's optimal utilisation of stress and stressful events in order to achieve a positive attitude to life (Coetzee & Cilliers, 2001; Viviers & Cilliers, 1999). On the basis of Antonovsky's writings, Strümpfer (1995) argued that not only the factors that influence physical health should be considered. By including the sources of strength, the paradigm became more embracing and holistic than the original salutogenesis and was named *fortigenesis*: the origin of strengths (Strümpfer, 1995). Based on these ideas, Wissing and van Eeden (1997, 2002) proposed that the focus should be not only on the origins of psychological strengths – as implied by the previous two terms, salutogenesis and fortigenesis – but should be extended to include the nature, dynamics, and enhancement of psychological well-being. They therefore proposed the term psychofortology, generally referred to as *fortology*.

Van Lingen (2005, cited in Olivier et al., 2005) defined wellness as 'a conscious and continuous process of holistic self-development based on personally determined goals for wellbeing, and leading towards the enhancement of individual, organisational, and community health and wellbeing' (p. 914). The definition focuses not only on the individual's mental health, but also emphasises the importance of context (Olivier et al., 2005). Though it seems mergers and incorporations of institutions in higher education have a devastating effect on the emotional and professional lives of employees at all levels (Jansen, 2002), employees tend to enter merger processes with evidence of psychological well-being. Collins (2005) referred to *emotional labour* as the term used to describe situations where employees are required to display emotions that may differ from those they actually feel and *emotional contagion* when people are influenced by emotions from others. Emotional contagion, according to Ashkanasy, Hartel, and Duas (2002) also occurs among work groups where one employee's positive emotional display affects group performance, and can lead to greater cooperativeness, less conflict, and positive perceptions of performance and change.

In January 2004 Vista University Distance Education Campus (VUDEC) was officially incorporated into the merger between the University of South Africa (Unisa) and Technikon South Africa (TSA). This study explored the people issues experienced in the

incorporation and shared the co-construction of the voices of four employees as well as my own voice (as researcher and employee) from VUDEC during the pre-merger phase. The main objective of this investigation was to build towards a theory of the psychological well-being of employees from VUDEC during the incorporation process.

Participating employees gained the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences and of well-being during the incorporation process, and it soon became apparent that the interventional nature of these interviews formed an integral component of the emerging theory of well-being. Since this investigation was undertaken from a social constructionist point of view, the research act in itself is seen as socially constructed. My dual role as co-participant and researcher in the co-construction of the context to express experiences was recorded and reflected upon throughout this investigation, allowing the opportunity to gain deeper insight not only into the participants' experiences but also my own experiences and understanding of a sense of well-being during the process.

METHOD

A social constructionist grounded theory approach

A social constructionist grounded theory approach was followed due to its focus on firsthand knowledge of empirical worlds as well as its systematic inductive guidelines for collecting and analysing information in order to build a theoretical framework which explains the phenomenon of interest (Charmaz, 2000). The social constructionist approach assumes a relativist ontology of multiple social realities, a subjectivist epistemology in the mutual creation of knowledge by the investigator and the participants, and hermeneutic methodological procedures to interpret participants' understanding of their experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). The approach acknowledges that a research investigation is simultaneously an intervention (Gergen, 2000) and the involvement of the researcher is explicitly acknowledged in the process of constructing a social reality (Symon & Cassell, 1998).

Social constructionist methods are qualitative, interpretive, and concerned with meaning. On an ontological level social constructionists view the experiences and understandings of

individuals and groups as derived from and leading to larger discourses, and consequently approach people as though their thoughts, feelings, and experiences are the products of systems of meaning that exist at a social rather than individual level (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). The emphasis is on the social aspects of knowledge development and although it portrays individuals as having cognitive structures that are integral to this process, social constructionism contend that these structures are social in origin rather than hard-wired into the human organism (Gergen & Semin, 1990).

Constructionists are of the belief that our values and interests can never be disentangled from our observations and we can therefore not know reality apart from our interpretations of it (Dean, 1993). As human beings we invent concepts, models, and schemes to make sense of experience, and these constructions are continuously being tested and modified as we gain new experience. Interpretations are not constructed in isolation but against a backdrop of shared understanding, practices, and language (Schwandt, 2003). Gergen (1985) stated that, according to constructionism, knowledge is not something people possess, but rather, something people do together, and is seen as the product of social construction processes under the influence of cultural, historical, political, and economic conditions. Gergen (1985) characterised social constructionism as a movement towards redefining psychological constructs such as mind, self, and emotion as socially constructed processes, to be 'removed from the head and placed within the realm of social discourse' (p. 271).

Strauss and Corbin (1990) argued that underlying the grounded theory approach lies the assumption that all of the constructs pertaining to a given phenomenon have not been identified. This may be the case in this particular field of interest. Generating a theory by following the principles of the grounded theory approach is based more on observation than on deduction. In generating theory, participants involved in this investigation interact, take actions, or enter a process in reaction to the identified phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 1998). The main assumption of the constructionist grounded theory approach is that individuals create and maintain meaningful worlds through dialogue by attributing meaning to their realities and acting within these attributions (Burr, 1995).

Researcher and participants co-create the data and enter the data analysis phase through a process of interaction. The discovered realities emerge from the interactive process and entail the seeking of meaning through both the participants' as well as the researcher's views and values as well as their actions. In studying implicit meaning the focus is on beliefs and ideologies as well as situations and structures (Charmaz, 2000). Due to the inductive nature of social constructionist grounded theory the emerging theory is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through concurrent systematic data collection and analysis of data. Data collection, analysis, and existing theory stand in reciprocal relationship with each other (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998).

Data collection and theoretical sampling

In contrast to research designs that begin with a well-defined, testable set of hypotheses, grounded theory specifies no specific data-gathering instrument or analytical procedure prior to the data collection process (Siegel, 2000). Theoretical sampling and a constant comparative method of data analysis however form integral components in the development of theory (Charmaz, 2000; Flick, 1999; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The constant comparative method allows for the comparing of data from different participants; the same participant at different points in time; different incidents; as well as information in one category with other categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Constructionist researchers usually make use of unstructured, open-ended qualitative materials, and value data collected in context and with minimal disturbance of the natural setting. However, Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999), pointed out that while the focus is on uncovering the ways in which the social world is constructed to appear real and natural, from a social constructionist perspective it becomes problematic to recognise a setting as 'natural' and knowing when it has been unduly 'disturbed'. Social constructionist researchers are sceptical of claims that some kinds of data are more authentic than others.

The formulation of research questions posed a dynamic challenge, especially during the initial stages of this investigation. The main challenge was to formulate a research question or questions that would give me the flexibility and freedom to explore in depth the

phenomenon of psychological well-being during the pre-merger phase. I therefore entered the first conversational interviews with participants by asking more general questions pertaining to their experiences of the incorporation and the possible impact on their well-being. The assumption was that the questions would become progressively more narrow and more focussed during this investigation and specifically with the emerging of themes during the different analytical phases. De Vos and van Zyl (1998) recommended that the research questions in a grounded theory study include statements that identify the phenomenon to be studied. These statements provide guidance as to what exactly needs to be focussed on and what needs to be identified in order for the constructs of the theory to emerge. These questions also tend to focus on action and process. The nature of the merger as an active process provided the ideal opportunity to explore participants' experiences and attitudes towards the process and its impact on their professional and personal lives.

Participants in this investigation were invited to participate based on their ability to contribute to the development of the theoretical constructs of psychological well-being as experienced during the incorporation. The four participants interviewed during this investigation were all female, three were white and one black, two were employed in academic departments and two in administrative departments. Two of the participants were lecturers, the third participant was a senior member in die Department of Human Resources (HR), and the fourth an administrative assistant. Three of the participants were full time employees and the fourth appointed on a contract basis. The employees participated in this investigation on a voluntary basis and their consent was obtained before their entrance into the investigation. The identity of participants was protected and information was treated with confidentiality during all the phases of the investigation as well as in the final reporting. Participants were informed of the ongoing nature of the interviews and they agreed to follow-up interviews. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed and the transcripts were made available to participants for their verification, thus allowing participants to continuously reflect on their experiences of the process.

A Wellness Development Workshop, attended by 35 participants, was coordinated by the Centre for HIV/AIDS at VUDEC in collaboration with HR at Vista Central Campus during

September 2003. Representatives from HR from all eight Vista Campuses as well as from Central Campus were invited to attend the workshop as well as representatives from the Student Development Department, Central Campus, academics, and post graduate learners in the HIV/AIDS programmes at VUDEC. I was approached to facilitate the opening session, a two-hour session with the aim of sharing knowledge of mergers and employee well-being and in doing so to set the stage for the rest of the workshop on the development of wellness. The timing of the workshop fitted in well with the beginning of my investigation into employees' well-being during the incorporation of VUDEC.

Constant comparative method of data analysis

The constant comparative method of data analysis commences with *coding* as a form of content analysis to find and conceptualise the underlying issues in the data (Charmaz, 2000). During the reading of transcribed interviews, I became aware that participants used words and phrases that highlight an issue of importance to the study (see Allan, 2003). This was noted and briefly described, before I continued to search for emerging codes. The process of comparing identified codes with each other in order to find higher order commonalities produces *concepts* (Allan, 2003). Comparing each concept with all other concepts, leads to the identification of further commonalities which form the even broader *categories*. Finally, linking categories and investigating the connections between concepts lead to the emerging *theory* (Allan, 2003; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Constructionist analysis forms an integral part of the research process and does not only commence after all the data have been collected (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). The different phases of the research are interconnected, and the analysis of data occurred concurrently with the collection of data. As main concepts were refined during the analyses of the transcripts of the initial phase of interviewing the need for further information to saturate the identified themes arose, and employees from other academic faculties and administrative departments were invited to participate at a later stage of this investigation. Conversations with my promoter and co-promoter, both involved with mergers in higher education in South Africa, emerged as a further source in saturating the constructs of psychological well-being.

Symon and Cassell (1998) conceded that the research act is in itself socially constructed. The involvement of the researcher is therefore explicitly acknowledged in the process of constructing the social reality. My own experiences and awareness as an employee at VUDEC remained a key component in this investigation. I therefore continuously reflected on these experiences as well as on the conversations with co-participants, the literature, and the merger as an action and a process. Existing theories, both in terms of the impact of mergers on employees as well as more general constructs of psychological well-being, remained a salient factor at all levels of the analysis. Glaser and Strauss (1967) encouraged researchers to use any material relevant to the field of interest, which according to Allan (2003) include the theoretical writings of other authors. The analysis was extended to allow for an integration of existing theory and the developed theoretical constructs of psychological well-being as they pertain to the participants in this investigation (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Through the constant comparing of the identified codes and concepts, three main categories emerged. These are (1) communication and negotiations, (2) impact on personal and institutional life, and (3) the need for intervention and empowerment (see Table 3 below).

Table 3. Emergence of categories from the concepts

Categories	Concepts
Communication & negotiations	Experience of negotiations Need for information / Lack of information / Rumours Need assistance
Employee experiences on personal and institutional levels	Uncertainties experienced Job insecurities Comfort zone Institutional culture Academic properties

	Decline in institution Race and conflict Impact on personal life Expectations
Intervention & empowerment	Support systems Positive attitude Religion Experience and reflections of wellness programme

Communication and negotiation of positions and power

The incorporation communicated: A mix of fantasy and facts

During all the phases of mergers and incorporations, employees seemed to have an almost insatiable desire for information, and misinterpretation and rumours are common (Anderson, 1999). It may therefore not be surprising that participants expressed intense uncertainty as to the exact nature and progress of the incorporation process. As one administrative employee pointed out: *We are all in the dark. We don't even know what is happening and people up above seem to know what's going on. It is hearsay that we are going to merge by January 2004, but we don't know how true that is.*

Research indicates that employees frequently report that they are not being informed on a regular basis with respect to the progress of the merger and consequently fear that their careers are at stake (Mercer, 1993). Employee morale can drop dramatically once a merger or incorporation is announced and can almost immediately lead to fears that they will lose their jobs, seniority or expected promotions. They lament the loss of control of their careers (Sleek, 1998) as expressed by an administrative employee: *At first it was scary, very uncertain. I thought where are you going to? What opportunities lie ahead of you? Job security? What is guaranteed at the end? When you hear of other institutions that were merged and you hear they are busy with retrenchments then you think okay so I'm going over, for how long? A lot of bad, negative feelings. That was how I felt at first.*

Anderson (1999) argued that it is impossible to over-communicate throughout a merger process. Communication is crucial during every stage even when there is nothing new to say (Anderson, 1999; Appelbaum, Gandell, Yortis et al., 2000; Balmer & Dinnie, 1999; Cartwright & Cooper, 1995; Pikula, 1999). The mere act of communicating and listening was interpreted by employees as a form of respect, which in itself may caused a shift towards more positive attitudes (Hunsaker & Coombs, 1988).

Soon after a merger announcement, the rumour mill starts and people trade on worst-case scenarios. The first experiences of the merger syndrome (see Table 2) became visible and result in heightened self-interest. People became pre-occupied with what the merger or incorporation entails for themselves, their incomes, and their careers. Tension and distrust were immediately cited as the consequences of the merger announcement. Employees developed a story line about the implications, often a mix of fact and fantasy (Appelbaum, Gandell, Shapiro, Belisle, & Hoeven, 2000; Marks, 1997).

Inadequate communication throughout merger processes impacted dramatically on employees' perceptions and preparation for the changes lying ahead. Ambiguous institutional direction and unclear roles and responsibilities may lead management to be slow in announcing the vision and mission of the new merged institution (Anderson, 1999). Communications from Vista University Central Campus management during the pre-merger phase varied in content and contributed largely to uncertainty and consequent anxiety amongst employees. Issues of authority, knowledge, power, institutional politics, and uncertainty with regard to negotiation powers prevailed.

Two key uncertainties voiced during the pre-merger phase included the exact nature and meaning of 'incorporation' and 'management'. Questions were raised as to the negotiating power of a campus earmarked for incorporation. Did the incorporation of VUDEC mean that the two merging partners, Unisa and TSA, were in a more powerful position with regard to the policy making of the new merged institution? The Higher Education Act stated that an incorporating subdivision becomes part of another institution without that institution's legal status being affected (Ministry of Education, 2003). The merger

guidelines further stated that the only legal requirement that applies to incorporations is the date of the incorporation. Hall, Symes, and Luescher (2004) pointed to the fact that uncertainty prevails as to the 'equal partner' status of incorporating subdivisions, and warned that the Ministry and institutions might not have shared the same notion of equal partnership. The status of incorporation partners in merger discussions is an important issue, according to Hall et al. (2004), and highlights the complexity of the process as well as the environment surrounding the merger.

Uncertainties were further triggered by the vagueness as to who exactly represented VUDEC in the negotiation process. Vista Central Campus management continued to act on behalf of the different campuses, challenging the role and authority of VUDEC Campus management. Appelbaum, Gandell, Yortis et al. (2000) argued that a number of hurdles can get in management's way that may prevent the integration process from being managed well. The complexity, level of uncertainty, and degree of risk that management faces can increase substantially when unexpected events occur. The lack of experience of the management team with mergers and incorporations and the fact that each merger and incorporation is unique can also explain the reason for inadequate communication and leadership (Appelbaum, Gandell, Yortis et al., 2000). Reddy (2007) was of the opinion that since mergers of institutions in higher education in South Africa was an externally motivated institutional change, management need to create a participative and open culture in order to overcome negative employee perceptions.

The VUDEC Merger Manager, appointed to represent employees on negotiation forums had an enormously difficult task, as pointed out by an academic employee: *I think our merger manager has been working very, very hard and she's running her own department. Under very difficult circumstances she's doing her very best.* Despite the regular feedback she provided, a clash with Vista Central Campus management seemed to remain an obstacle throughout the pre-merger phase and often added to more mystification. Employees remained confused as to who to trust during the negotiation process, as pointed out by one academic employee: *I came to the conclusion that our merger manager does not have that much insight. But it is subjective, we all see things differently.*

Though employees expressed their concerns with regard to the lack of information and direction received from management, an awareness of obstacles usually experienced during transitional processes was raised by an academic employee:

The situation here at Vista is exacerbated by other factors, some of which are the inefficiencies, the breakdown in communication, the fact that sometimes I get the impression that management has their own agenda which is not so much for the students and academics but more in terms of their own power and position and that is also part of the usual merger process. There have been too many uncertainties. And the Department of Education was not going to back down on this whole issue so we should have been a lot more proactive than we have been. I think in terms of the merger teams they haven't done as much as they should have done. They could have really set the wheels in motion a long time ago and had ongoing meetings and we didn't have to wait for the other institutions so much. I don't think being a small component of the merger process means that you have to be the silent partner or you can't take initiative. You can.

Ambiguity in an institution, according to Feldman (1991), occurs when there is no clear interpretation of a phenomenon or set of events. Meyerson (1991) took this definition further by stating that individuals' interpretations of an event can vary radically, and that ambiguity can exist within the institution as a whole as well as within individuals' own experiences. A general theme for all types of ambiguities is the absence or insufficiency of information and communication (Risberg, 1997). Sluzki (1993) was of the opinion that individuals need time-and-space continuity, need to be able to predict context, to retain order, to provide causality for events, and to organise coherent narratives in order to be able to retain a continuous image of self.

Concerns were raised as to whether all employees had equal access to information relating to the negotiations and progress during the pre-merger phase. Employees in academic and administrative departments might have easier access to information through attendance of departmental, faculty, and campus management meetings. These employees were also more

likely to have access to computers, Internet, and other information sources and consequently be more informed of transformational discourses. An employee in HR reflected on staff members who seemed to have little, if any access to information:

I feel staff members, especially the assistants, kitchen staff, staff members from Technical Services do need to know what is going on and I think we should try and counsel them. I don't know how we can do that, but I feel they should be informed, because when they [management] conduct the meetings, like when you are called in for an update on the merger mostly it is done in English and the people on the ground level who speak and understand one of the African Languages better than English . . . so there is nobody to translate to them. At the end of the day they get second hand information from what was said.

Impact on institutional and personal life

The ship was sinking

It is not only the merger itself that makes employees anxious; the perceived decline in the institution before the merger takes place, the potential lack of job opportunities elsewhere, and other constraints that prevent employees from leaving the institution before or during the merger, create excessive stress (Appelbaum, Gandell, Shapiro et al., 2000). During the pre-merger phase institutions are challenged to maintain the status quo while implementing change. In being confronted with a decline in available resources employees are often expected to maintain traditional norms and objectives while delivering the product of the institution (Skodvin, 1999). In addition, downsizing may leave employees with a higher workload and insufficient guidance regarding new responsibilities and functions (Mercer, 1993).

An academic employee reflected on the decline of the institution and the impact on the working environment: *I need order in my life, structure and order. There is too much chaos for me now. There is too much uncertainty, not in terms of our jobs we are not going to lose our jobs that I am one hundred per cent sure of, depending on yourself of course and your competency. But the chaos, not being able to do your work, I am sick and tired of that.*

The necessity of transformation in higher education in South Africa was raised by an academic employee: *There are two main reasons, the one is to get rid of all things that remind us of apartheid, but the main thing is the economic reasons, to tune into international or world market competition, and to be able to provide the right kind of student.* Transformation in the South African Higher Education landscape was mainly advocated to address two particular problems of the apartheid legacy. These were firstly the decline in enrolment and bankruptcies at historically black universities and secondly, staff profiles of former white universities that did not closely reflect national racial distribution (Jansen, 2002; Reddy, 1998).

Not all staff members at VUDEC were appointed on a full-time basis, as some were contract workers while others were members of Central Campus located on the VUDEC campus. When it became known that Vista Central Campus would not be included in the incorporation into the new Unisa and would consequently close its doors, the career future of these employees from Central Campus as well as the contract workers at VUDEC were highly at risk. One administrative employee pointed out: *When the project is over and done with, then your job is over and done with. You are always looking out for new funding opportunities. But also with the merger it did cause me a lot of uncertainty because it was never said that our project would go over in the merger process, so there was that uncertainty as well.*

In investigating the perceptions of staff members involved in institutional mergers at three Colleges of Education in the Free State, Hay and Fourie (2002) reported a high level of fear of retrenchment amongst respondents. The risk of losing job security was not surprisingly raised throughout the present investigation, as expressed by an academic employee: *The general concern is: Will we be able to hold our jobs, and the thing of pension and provident funds, and the voluntary severance packages. . . that's something that one always thinks, you know. One does get tempted by voluntary severance packages and one never knows that if the possibility arises if one will actually go for that, you know. But right now I can't see myself taking the package yet I do have concerns about job security, perhaps.*

Despite uncertainties with regard to their own future and limited access to clear guidance as to the integration process ahead, participants agreed that Vista University in general and VUDEC as a campus could not continue to exist in its current form. The transformational expectations in higher education seemed an unavoidable reality.

It's hard to let go

The readiness of an institution and especially of its employees for entering a merger process is a key factor in the timing of mergers. The changes that employees can effectively cope with, depending on the magnitude of the change, have to be considered (Wyngaard & Kapp, 2004). Marks (1999) summarised as follows:

If I could tell you just one word about the human side of mergers and acquisitions, it would be 'control.' What really scares people in a combination is that they have little control of their work situation – whether they like their current job or not, they at least know what rules to play by, how to get things done, and how to maximize rewards. (p. 31)

Anxiety provoked by leaving the familiar for unfamiliar territory, was expressed by one academic employee:

Everybody worries; nobody wants to get out of something that they are used to. It is very hard to give up in terms of habits you know, what you can do what you can't do, the kind of shortcuts you can take, the kind of things that is absolutely necessary. Sometimes you reach a stage in your life where you just want to carry on in a comfort zone. And I think that lots of people have that mentality that they are just not prepared to cope with change.

Embedded in the culture of an academic institution is the curriculum and students, and questions arose as to how the strengths and weaknesses of these cultural dimensions will be affected by the incorporation. One participant responded:

I must tell you I am not one of those ones who say that VUDEC must remain because we cater for a specific clientele. I agree with Jonathan [Jansen, 2003], when he said that one of the positive things of all these mergers is to get rid of all these students who do not really belong in higher education. He said that he does not refer to students who have the potential but because of financial constraints and because of previous restrictions were not able to enter higher education but he refers to those people who think they are entitled to higher education . . . not everyone is entitled to higher education.

Whose worry was it anyway?

The tensions in the dynamics of a merger process are characterised by factors associated with change in any organisation. These factors include risk, uncertainty, negotiation, leadership, and planning (Skodvin, 1999). What employees see, hear, and feel during the merger process fundamentally affects their relation to the new institution and whether they commit to its struggle for future success. The ‘soft’ dimensions of culture, values, behaviour, and working styles begin to take shape during the very first step of the merger process (Siemens, 2002). Cartwright and Cooper (1995) pointed out that merger and incorporation decisions and negotiations tend to focus primarily around financial and legal issues, and very seldom include personal issues. Most institutions tend to wait until culture and people issues pose a threat to the success of the negotiations before addressing these concerns (De Voge & Spreier, 1999).

Employees became aware of their lack of representativeness once the merger reached its incorporation phase, as pointed out by an administrative employee:

I would like to know that when we merge, how secure are our jobs after the merger? How many years will it take for the new institution to realise that we are overstaffed now and how are they going to work it out? How are they going to sort out the problem of being overstaffed and stuff like that? Are they going to retrench people and how are they going to do that? Is it going to be first in and last out? There are so many questions. Is it going to be a new institution all together? Are we going to be new staff members all together in the new institution, or are they going to count our years of service?

A sense of *we are in this together* was especially evident during the months prior to the incorporation. During a sub-faculty merger meeting different colleagues expressed their concern regarding the lack of information and structure and consequently elected three coordinators, including myself, to steer the process on behalf of the sub-faculty. A list of concerns to be discussed with the campus merger manager was compiled. The sub-faculty members also undertook to update all documents pertaining to the programmes offered in the departments as well as the details of staff members involved.

Impact of merger stress

In terms of the impact of the incorporation on her personal life, one participant said:

It is not the best time in my life. It is a very stressful time in terms of my personal life. If I had a smooth sailing personal life, I would be in a better position to cope with the uncertainties and the challenges in my professional life. But unfortunately both the uncertainties are in both areas of my life . . . no it is not happening at the best possible time for me. I need to carry on and maybe the empowerment to some extent in my professional life hopefully will lead to a bigger amount of empowerment in my personal life.

Consequences of merger stress are inevitably visible in employees' psychological and physical well-being (Marks, 1997). Employees fear that they have very little control over the merger process and the consequent events that arise from the merger. This may represent a significant and potentially emotional and stressful life event. As already mentioned, threats to the well-being of employees include insecurity, fears concerning job loss, job changes, compensation changes, and changes in power, status, and prestige (Cartwright & Cooper, 1992). These threats may lead to the experience of career and life dissatisfaction, lower self-esteem, depression, and anxiety (Anderson, 1999). Tension and conflict increase at the workplace as well as at home where family members are also influenced by insecurities regarding their fates. Rates of illness and absenteeism also tend to rise during the merger process (Marks, 1997). Sluzki (1993) argued that when an experience of trauma is extreme, the dominant effect is one of psychic numbing, and life is

experienced as both future-less and past-less.

During the months prior to the incorporation, management and employees had to deal with the suicide of a colleague. The manner in which management opted to respond to this unfortunate event added to the confusion and anger amongst employees. Apparently out of respect for the colleague's family the unofficial message was sent out that the colleague suffered from a heart attack, and an official notice of the funeral arrangements was communicated to employees. In responding to a question as to whether I could refer to this incident in my research, a close colleague of the deceased responded:

Obviously everyone knows whenever there is a merger, rationalisation in businesses, everywhere, there are always casualties. So this definitely is a casualty because of the merger. Whether you can include it, when it is a known fact that it happens everywhere, this definitely can be considered as part of that. My deceased colleague's wife told me after conversations with the psychologist that my colleague was not prepared for the merger. He did not want to merge. That was because of a lot of stress. It is a lot of extra work, it is a lot of extra pressure the moment you are more than three people in your department. Because of his personality . . . we all have stress . . . he didn't have more stress than anybody else ... but because of his personality he found it very difficult.

The traumatic event impacted tremendously on the morale of employees. The main concern raised amongst colleagues was the lack of any form of intervention by management. A group of employees approached a representative from campus management and requested a memorial service to be arranged on campus. The request was originally met with reservations, and after consultation with various colleagues I arranged a meeting with the representative. During the meeting I raised the issue of the death of our colleague and that the silence on the part of management could and were interpreted as an uncaring attitude and recommended a meeting with employees to be scheduled in order to acknowledge the deceased's role in the institution. I also raised the possibility of counselling for employees during the remaining months of the pre-merger period and suggested that HR be approached to compile contact details of counselling services to be distributed on notice

boards as well as on the institutional web-page. These recommendations were welcomed and immediate actions were promised.

Employees perceived the original lack of intervention from management's side as symptomatic of the inadequate communication style that prevailed during the pre-merger phase. Colleagues close to the deceased visited the representative from campus management once again and a memorial service was granted. Employees affirmed their own positions by actively requesting management to address staff and to provide intervention strategies, also to the benefit of the working relationship within the institution. To this an academic employee responded:

Absolutely, yes definitely it contributed a lot. We had a meeting one morning and said for the first time in a long period we were one again. We work together, everyone does his or her part and yes, definitely it was wonderful to do that. And I must say the main reason why I also wanted it to be done [the memorial service] is it is also being recorded. A beautiful video was made which I am going to give to the family this afternoon for their sake because they are going through a very bad time. And yes, it provided closure.

Interventions and empowerment

Several intervention strategies have been suggested for managing the anxiety created by mergers and incorporations (Seo & Hill, 2005). Garpin and Herndon (2000) suggested top-down, formal communication that provides timely and accurate information about what will happen to the institution and employees to reduce anxiety-related stress amongst employees. Employee assistance programmes can reduce stress and help employees to cope with the uncertainties and demands of the merger process (Anderson, 1999). Hay and Fourie (2002) recommended that support structures be established and staff preparation programmes be instituted for employees undergoing transformation in South African institutions of higher education. Pikula (1999) stated that counselling on an individual basis may help employees to overcome merger stress and fear and to suggest coping strategies may help alleviate negative reactions. Since incorporations provide different opportunities for career mobility, counselling can further direct employee energies towards new career

paths and reaffirm commitment to the new institution (Pikula, 1999). Social support from life partners, friends, supervisors, co-workers, and relatives has also shown to assist employees in coping with the stress produced by mergers and incorporations (Scheck & Kinicki, 2000).

Time to intervene

It became quite clear that support structures needed to be implemented and employees be informed and reminded of existing support systems. Apart from HR with only two staff members at VUDEC, who mostly dealt with recruitment and administrative duties, it seemed that no other department provided the necessary support in terms of emotional well-being or distribution of merger literature. During the interview with one of the staff members in HR, the concern was raised that HR did not possess the necessary skills or access to information to provide adequate guidance and counselling to employees: *We would really like to have a counselling officer.* Again the concern was raised that employees in service departments, especially the cleaners and security guards did not always have direct access to information pertaining to the incorporation process. Subsequently, I approached the representative of campus management as well as the Merger Manager and arranged for a notice board specifically allocated to 'merger news' to be installed in the foyer of the VUDEC building. Notices and minutes of meetings and other relevant information pertaining to the incorporation as well as mergers in general were posted on the notice board. The space could have been utilised more effectively, and I mostly found myself the only one posting information on the board on a regular basis.

During the wellness development workshop participants were divided into groups and received two activities, (a) to identify people's issues as experienced on their campuses, and (b) to capture the Vista institutional culture. Participants identified issues experienced by employees across all eight Vista Campuses as follows: (a) fear of the unknown future; (b) job insecurity; (c) salaries and benefits of pension funds; (d) job satisfaction; (e) reconstruction of communication; and (f) Vista's unique working and lecturing culture. In terms of Vista's institutional culture the following characteristics were captured: (a) cultural diversity; (b) unique approach to authority; (c) 'laid-back' culture and

unwillingness to co-operate; (d) lack of policies and procedures; (e) complex and multi-campus settings; (f) inferiority complex about the 'Vista image'; (g) academic freedom and progressiveness; and (h) institutional history linked to the South African socio-political history. Based on the outcomes of the group discussion, the session continued to highlight definitions of well-being as well as the role of HR and managers of the institution to enhance the well-being of employees. The concept of merger syndrome was introduced and I provided a brief literature overview of employees' emotional reactions to mergers in general. All participants received documents containing literature on these issues, and were provided with guidance on how to gain more information. Support systems for the various Vista campuses were identified and participants agreed to facilitate similar workshops on their respective campuses.

A participant reflected as follows:

What I learnt there was to also look at other people's problems. All I thought about was my own problems, where am I going to go. I think everybody seems to be self-centred. And I learned that what I think is my biggest problem and what overruled my world at that stage, wasn't really that big a problem. There are other people who have bigger problems than I have. I think I learnt to stop thinking of myself and to think of other people sharing their experiences, to start listening and not to talk. If we start listening to everybody we might hear quite a lot of voices and hear what they say.

During follow-up conversations with participants of the workshop during the weeks following the workshop, it unfortunately became clear that very little became of these initiatives. I approached the representatives from VUDEC several times to encourage the schedule of a workshop or information session on campus, all to no avail. Eventually I decided to post copies of the workshop discussions on the merger notice board.

While it seemed that the institution failed in providing supportive systems, employees experienced their colleagues as supportive during the pre-merger phase. In the apparent absence of external support systems, employees further gained in the realisation of inner

strengths. An employee responded as follows to a question whether there was within the Vista system support and understanding for employees and the difficulties they might experience:

Not generally, no. But I must say having a member of the Psychology Department in my corridor is very nice. It is just a natural case of a supportive environment within this specific side of the corridor. But generally speaking people are doing their own thing and one doesn't really have time to sit down and talk about the emotional demands that are made on us, and the kind of support systems we need. Faculty meetings have allowed people to air their anxieties and there is some sort of negativity coming through but it is necessary for people to voice their feelings. The thing is since the last Faculty of Arts meeting there have been positive developments and those that were anxious and negative are now feeling more positive. It is a good thing that people had a chance to speak up and mention how they felt.

Empower the self and be enthusiastic

A positive attitude towards the incorporation seemed to be of utmost importance, as argued by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000): 'One dispositional trait that appears to mediate between external events and a person's interpretation of them is optimism. This trait includes both little optimism and big optimism' (p. 9). The question then arose whether there were any potential positive consequences for employees in the incorporation? Was it in fact possible for employees to be positive in such a vibrant time of change and uncertainty? Marks (1999) advised employees to 'rise above the noise and confusion, empower yourself, be upbeat and enthusiastic' (p. 30). Although the discussion so far presented a rather sceptical scenario of employees' experiences, participants not only awaited the challenges associated with the incorporation with reservations. Some participants acknowledged the potential gain of joining a new merged institution, as expressed by one participant:

On a personal level I have to force myself to rise to the challenge, because I am subhead of the department right now. So, I have to kind of act as a leader within my department. I find

myself in a situation where I am forced to handle certain things and I think that, like it or not, I have to do it. Therefore it would be in some ways an empowering experience for me to negotiate, to be in the front line, and to be involved. One learns to negotiate, one learns how to compromise etc . . . all as part of being in a leadership position. It is a position where I had to take initiative to consult with members of my department and things like that. I would have been consulted in the past. I have to do the consulting now and then taking that process forward to the merging partners. So, yes it would be empowering, although I'm not so sure whether I would have wanted it to happen, but I have been forced into the process and I am going to look at it positively.

Lang (2002) argued that it is not surprising that smaller institutions, as participants in a merger, perceive the merger differently from their larger, more comprehensive partners. According to Lang (2002), numerous studies indicated that smaller colleges and universities typically seek to merge, amongst other reasons, to implement new programmes that could only be offered through the merger. These institutions further want to secure new resources for their programmes and services and want to benefit financially from government incentives to merge with larger institutions.

Colleges and universities are therefore not surprisingly attracted to inter-institutional co-operation in order to do things that they cannot do individually. Throughout the research literature on inter-institutional co-operation, including mergers, the motivating theme is economy and efficiency (Lang, 2002). In terms of readiness to enter the new merged institution, one participant said: *I find myself in the process of desperately wanting to be incorporated into UNISA. That is where I find myself at this stage. Going with what I have from VUDEC but become a member of UNISA. If possible tomorrow morning I will start there.* Academic employees were of the opinion that the incorporation into Unisa will allow their academic aspirations to flourish, as voiced by one participant: *UNISA still have, I think, a more academically inclined environment that is better to work in. We had a lot of freedom here at VUDEC and it depended on your self. But still you need that environment in which everyone is tuned in more or less to the same thing. And yes definitely so we will be more academically inclined.*

As a consequence of VUDEC's original emphasis on offering further training courses for teachers, many lecturers were employed as secondary school teachers before joining VUDEC. Some employees perceived their careers at Vista as a *stepping stone* with the opportunity to gain experience in tertiary education. I recall a friend's response when I was appointed as lecturer at Vista in 1992: *Oh, a soft landing in the academic world*. One of the academic employees reflected:

It is interesting to note that I did apply for a job at UNISA many years ago, but I obviously wasn't considered because there was job reservation and I don't think that I qualified to be there in any case. Now that we're going to the merger and are going to be part of the UNISA set-up, after all these years of being in the tertiary set-up, I feel better prepared to handle such a big number of students and the kind of challenges that come with being in a bigger department. This time it would not be too challenging and I think it was initially because I came from a primary school to a university. It is like the next step in a life cycle, you know.

Once employees received the green light to enter negotiations with representatives from the other two institutions, though mainly still with representatives from departments at UNISA, employees seemed to experience the planning and negotiations of the incorporation quite differently, as voiced by one employee:

My experience in our meetings with the Faculty at UNISA, is that they are professional people. Everyone wants to protect his or her own turf, you know . . . sometimes I get the impression they are professional, they are academics, they are busy with their own work. I have that same opinion, you know, I do my work, leave me alone. Don't bother me with other stuff. But having said that, their management structures, their HOD's, they are completely open. They are willing to accommodate us. They are the bigger institution, I mean, that is so logic. I always ask the question: who has the best competencies? But people think they [Unisa] are Big Brother. It is not true and obviously logically, they are the bigger partner. They want to accommodate us, they do not want to go to extreme

measures to try and influence everyone to be part of this and be incorporated, of course not. And neither would I have done that. They are completely open and willing to accommodate us.

Although discussions and policy making processes relating to the transformation of higher education in South Africa commenced in 1996, employees only became officially and actively involved with the negotiation process in the two to three months prior to the incorporation. Employees sensed that it was not so much the institution that negotiated their role and place in the new institutions any more, but themselves who needed to affirm their own position, as pointed out by a participating academic:

I can see myself fitting into various sections at UNISA and hoping that I will be given a choice and I am hoping that I will not be told "you have to do this or you have to do that". I want to be given an option of where I feel comfortable about fitting in. I hope that I am given the option not to do what I am not comfortable doing. I am reading their stuff and I am happy with what I see. I need time, at least a year and I shouldn't be given a massive workload initially, I should be given time to ease myself into that situation and then gradually go up. Like it was here.

As the only staff member in the Department of Psychology at VUDEC, the time had arrived for me to make contact with representatives of the Department of Psychology at Unisa. I contacted the departmental secretary and introduced myself telephonically. She informed me, quite enthusiastically, that they were fully aware of my existence and were awaiting my call. A note from my journal (September 05, 2003):

The Chair of the Department of Psychology at Unisa invited me for lunch this afternoon in a restaurant in town. Well, I must confess it was unusual but very much up my alley to meet on neutral grounds, sharing good food and wine while "tasting" what the other has to offer. Apart from discussing the respective curricula, I became convinced that there is space for me at Unisa. The experiences gained at Vista over the last couple of years may

come in quite handy. Well, the conversation went extremely well and I left the meeting with a feeling of certainty – even security – regarding the journey ahead.

BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS

The emergent grounded theory of employees' psychological well-being during the pre-merger phase of the incorporation is based on three main categories: communication and negotiation of positions and power, employee experiences on a personal and institutional level, and the need for intervention strategies and empowerment. Employees experienced acute awareness of the uncertainties, anxieties, frustrations, and anger typically experienced during institutional pre-merger phases. The perceived lack of communication from Vista Central Campus and lack of representativeness in the negotiation processes added to a mystifying pre-merger context. Employees experienced a strong sense of loss of control over their careers and future, highlighted by the perceived decline in the institution in the months prior to the incorporation.

Experiences related to the first stages of the merger syndrome, specifically denial, fear, anger, and sadness (see Table 2) were clearly raised by participants. Employees need time and the opportunity to properly mourn the loss of the old, so that they are able to move ahead with the new (Appelbaum, Gandell, Yortis et al., 2000). An academic employee summarised it as follows:

It is like being thrown in at the deep end and learning how to swim. And we find ourselves having our legs under the water, but as long as we are determined we can keep our heads above water and at least float along if not swim. We can go with the current and we can flow with the current and not oppose it, and not swim against the current. Go with the current and then eventually reach a point where we are swimming strongly.

Another note from my journal (December 05, 2003):

Ironically, this morning at 12h00 management and employees at VUDEC celebrated the institution's twenty-one years of existence on the same day as the official closing of the

institution was celebrated. Earlier this morning I attended the Psychology Department at Unisa's end of the year function. I have been introduced to the staff and was informed that my office at Unisa is available and my name already put on the door.

Bridges (cited in Appelbaum, Gandell, Yortis et al., 2000) is of the opinion that '[b]eginnings and endings are intimately related; when an event ends, another is about to begin' (p. 7). Evidence relating to the next stages of the merger syndrome, acceptance, relief and interest (see Table 1) was already voiced by some participants during the pre-merger phase. In preparing for the incorporation, participants, more specifically academic employees, became aware of their own strength and the potential gain that were awaiting them and their careers at the new institution. The majority of academic employees began to negotiate their new positions with representatives from the academic departments at Unisa and TSA. Unfortunately the same was not true for administrative employees, since towards the end of the pre-merger phase the majority of these employees were still in the dark as to where, if at all, in the new institution they would be transferred to.

While closing the doors of an institution with a rich, vibrant, and at times stormy history and culture, not all was perceived as lost. Participating employees prepared for *marching up the hill* with a sense of wellness, the notion of *we are in this together*, while most, probably unknowingly, prepared for the final stages of the merger-syndrome.

ENDNOTE

This manuscript is the first of a series based on my Dlott et Phil research investigation of the incorporation of VUDEC into the merger between Unisa and TSA under the title: *Mergers in higher education: Towards a survival kit for conserving the self.*

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MANUSCRIPT 2

VUDEC EMBRACES ITS INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE ON THE EVE OF THE INCORPORATION INTO UNISA

This investigation formed part of a larger project steered by the Institute for Education Research at Unisa. Vista University Distance Education Campus (VUDEC) was purposefully selected as one of six learning institutions in two case studies for the investigation of institutional cultures of higher education institutions involved in post apartheid mergers. The aim of the larger project was to investigate the institutional cultures of the participating institutions in the context of institutional mergers, comprehensives, and incorporations. On the eve of the incorporation of VUDEC into Unisa, members from governance, academic and administrative departments, as well as students, gained the opportunity to reflect on the institution's history and contribution to higher education. In doing so, participants critically evaluated the readiness for the incorporation of VUDEC into Unisa. By means of content analysis the following themes emerged: a historical overview, institutional transformation, the working environment, and the earmarking of the institution for incorporation.

Keywords: employees; higher education; incorporation; institutional culture; mergers; transformation

Institutional culture defined

One of the best ways to begin to prepare for and to cope with challenges is to examine our own institutions in order to appreciate and engage diverse and often conflicting cultures that reside in them. (Bergquist, 1992, p. 230)

Organisational or institutional culture has increasingly emerged as a salient factor in affecting the integration process and subsequently influencing the outcomes of mergers and incorporations (Anderson, 1999; Appelbaum, Gandell, Yortis, Proper, & Jobin, 2000; Balmer & Dinnie, 1999; Bijlsma-Frankema, 2001; Cartwright & Cooper, 1993a, 1993b, 1995; Marks, 1997; Schraeder & Self, 2003). Institutional culture is seen as a system of shared symbols and meanings (Alvesson, 2002) and refers to the deep structure of an institution as grounded in its values, beliefs, and assumptions held by its members (Denison, 1996). Institutional culture further provides mutually understood rules that govern the cognitive and affective aspects of membership in an institution, as well as the ways in which these are developed and expressed by its members (Kunda, as cited in Alvesson, 2002). It is about the way members make sense of their experiences in the institution and how they define and interpret the situations they are in, in order to be able to function in a meaningful way (Bijlsma-Frankema, 2001).

Weber (1996) recommended that institutional culture, and specifically cultural differences, can ideally be investigated during mergers and acquisitions. When different institutions enter a merger process they move towards the creation of a new institutional identity with its own unique culture. The new identity and culture need to be nurtured to allow employees and other stakeholders to identify with the new institution (Balmer & Dinnie, 1999). Strategic fit often tends to be seen as an essential prerequisite for a successful institutional marriage and is broadly characterised by Schraeder and Self (2003) as the ‘similarity between organizational strategies or complementary organizational strategies setting the stage for potential strategic synergy’ (p. 511). Unfortunately, culture fit and culture compatibility is seldom seen as important considerations, especially during the decision-making phase of mergers when the focus is rather turned to financial and strategic factors (Cartwright & Cooper, 1993b).

Merging institutional cultures

Changes associated with a merger are often resisted by employees who fear the potential threat to the original institutional culture (Holden, 2001; Lynch & Lind, 2002; Siegel,

2000). The merger process by its very nature produces *us versus them* feelings and leads to a natural tendency for employees to focus on the differences as opposed to the similarities between the different institutions (Bijlsma-Frankema, 2001; Marks, 1997; Pikula, 1999). Employees consequently tend to perceive their way of doing things as superior to the style and practices of the other institution(s) (Anderson, 1999). Mergers often fail because stakeholders underestimate the potential threat of a culture clash, and competing cultures not managing to come together (Holden, 2001; Risberg, 1997). Harman and Meek (2002) recommended that leaders pay specific attention to keeping damaging cultural conflict to a minimum and to developing new loyalties, high morale, and a sense of community in the new institution.

Employees may have developed confidence in their own culture and identity and may have experienced successes and rewards within their existing institution. In the creation of a new identity and culture, employees need to accept new ways of doing things - often without appropriate consultation (Appelbaum et al., 2000). An awareness of cultural difference between the different institutions may add to the reluctance amongst employees to adapt to the new emerging culture. Marks (1999) reported that cultural clashes between institutions follow some predictable stages. At first employees notice the differences in how the other institution function and they tend to revalue their own ways of doing things. Then employees begin to evaluate the differences between the institutions and tend to view their way as superior to the other institution. Thirdly, employees begin to attack the other institution's culture and to defend their own. Eventually, the culture of one of these institutions is adopted in the new institution leaving the other side feeling betrayed. Horwitz et al. (2002) warned that if institutional cultural differences are ignored it may lead to high long-term costs. A merged entity may attempt to improve growth and productivity, but with a fragmented institutional culture.

Norgård and Skodvin (2002) proposed that a cultural approach is useful in an analysis of a merger between different higher education institutions. This approach is supported by Kotecha and Harman's (2001) notion that culture is of particular importance in the transformation of higher education in South Africa. These authors also warned that it would

be unwise to attempt to create integrated educational communities through the merging of cultures which are historically and symbolically non-complementary. These integrations should only be attempted if the implications are understood and addressed. Buono and Bowditch (1989) stated that even institutions that appear to be highly compatible merger partners may possess underlying cultural differences that can seriously hinder the integration.

Harman (1989) interpreted culture in the context of academic institutions as: 'Historically transmitted patterns of meaning expressed in symbolic form through the shared commitments, values and standards of behaviour peculiar to members of the profession, as well as the traditions, myths, rituals, language and other forms of expressive symbolism that encompass academic life and work' (p. 36). Harman (2002) further interpreted culture in academic institutions as deeply embedded and not easy to 'unfreeze or turn off at will' (p. 97). This seems to be especially evident in South African institutions of higher education with regard to their socially differentiated racial history and tradition (Harman & Harman, 2003).

During the merger between institutions it is not only a single institutional culture that merges with another. Bagraim (2001) argued that institutions consist of several sub-cultures rather than a single institutional culture. According to Bijlsma-Frankema (2001) it is not wise to approach culture as a homogeneous phenomenon throughout an institution; one should rather refer to *institutional cultures*. From a cultural perspective, according to Norgård and Skodvin (2002), an academic institution consists of a wide range of cultures related to different academic disciplines and vocational paths, different traditions in teaching and research, and so on. Academic institutions by their very nature consist of various sub-divisions: faculties, departments, academics, administrative staff, professional staff, management, governance, and other subgroups and individuals.

As a professional group, academics may be characterised more by 'divided loyalties, role ambiguity, heterogeneity, anarchical tendencies, conflict and self interest, than probably any other professional group such as doctors, lawyers, engineers and the like' (Harman,

2002, p. 98). This may not be unexpected since universities provide the ideal opportunity for contested views, contradictions, debate, and intellectual conflict (Harman, 2002). Alvesson (2002) argued that an institutional culture can be unique, with the combination of different subcultures leading to unique patterns and dynamics. The assumption is that the different subcultures interact rather than existing independently and in isolation within the institution. Institutional culture is, according to Alvesson (2002), best understood as mixtures of cultural manifestations of different levels and kinds. Cultural configurations in universities are multiple, complex, and shifting. Employees are connected to different degrees within institutions, departments, profession, gender, class, ethnic group, and so on. Cultures seem to overlap within an institutional setting and rarely manifest in a static and pure form.

The incorporation of VUDEC into the merger between Unisa and TSA

In 1996, the National Commission of Higher Education in South Africa recommended that an investigation be undertaken to plan for a single distance education institution. The collective goal of this institution would be the offering of quality distance education programmes and the co-ordination of the production of resource-based courses and course-material (Human Sciences Research Council, 1996). The process of consultation, advice, and proposals between 1996 and 2001 culminated in the National Plan on Higher Education (NPHE) which stipulated the framework and mechanisms for implementing and realising the policy goals of the Education White Paper of 1997 (Department of Education, 2001). Outcome 11 of the NPHE proposed the establishment of a single dedicated distance education institution through the merging of the University of South Africa (Unisa) and Technikon South Africa (TSA) and the incorporation of Vista University Distance Education Campus (VUDEC) into the merged institution (Department of Education, 2001). The merger implementation date was scheduled for January 2004 and the three institutions agreed that the merger process would consist of three phases: (a) the pre-merger or planning phase from October 2002 until December 2003; (b) the transition phase during January 2004 until December 2005; and (c) the merger plan implementation phase during January 2006 until January 2008 (Merger Managers, 2003).

Vista University consisted of eight satellite campuses of which VUDEC primarily served the distance education learners. VUDEC could further be divided into groups and subgroups, including academic, professional, administrative departments, and sub-departments. Bagraim (2001) argued the subgroups within an institution may hold different notions of the identity and functioning of that institution. The sub-cultures may even find themselves competing to define the institution's culture.

How then did VUDEC employees define and embrace their institutional culture on the even of the incorporation? This investigation formed part of a larger project steered by the Institute for Education Research at Unisa. Vista University Distance Education Campus (VUDEC) was purposefully selected as one of six learning institutions in two case studies for the investigation of institutional cultures of higher education institutions involved in post apartheid mergers. The aim of the investigation was to capture the experiences and reflections of employees as they pertain to the culture of the institution. In preparing for the transitional changes ahead, employees gained the opportunity to re-evaluate their own position and power, as well as that of the institution, while reflection on the culture of the incorporated institution.

METHOD

A case study approach was selected for this investigation. According to Lindegger (1999), case studies are usually thick descriptions rather than thin conclusions and provide rich longitudinal information about individuals, particular situations, or institutions. In using this approach, as proposed by Eisenhardt (2002), we as researchers (see Note 1) and participants were provided with the opportunity to develop an understanding of the cultural dynamics present within the institution. Case studies encourage the use of multiple methods incorporating a variety of sources and data as part of this investigation (Denscombe, 2003). Through triangulation, various data collection strategies were adopted which included semi-structured individual and focus group interviews, archival sources, multiple investigators, and multiple informants.

Purposive sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select participants for the semi-structured interviews, enabling the inclusion of participants who could richly contribute to the writing of the VUDEC institutional culture (Struwig & Stead, 2001). Participants were divided into two categories. The first category consisted of five representatives from top and middle management, who were interviewed individually. The second category consisted of four participants each selected from academic staff, administrative staff, and postgraduate students. The four participants of each group were invited to participate in semi-structured focus-group interviews. See Table 4 for demographic information about participants.

Table 4. Demographic details of participants

Category	Participants	Position	Gender	Race
Management & Governance	5	Campus Principal, Campus Registrar, Dean, Merger Manager, Head of Department	3 Male 2 Female	2 Black 1 Indian 2 White
Academics	4	Lecturers from various academic departments	1 Male 3 Female	1 Black 3 White
Administrative	4	Different administrative departments	2 Male 2 Female	3 White 1 Black
Students	4	Post graduate students	4 Female	4 Black

The interviews were conducted during August 2003. Permission to record the interviews was obtained from all participants and participants received a copy of the final report for their verification. Interview schedules that outlined suggested categories and questions to be asked during the interviews were provided by the Institute for Educational Research. These interview schedules were used as a framework for both the semi-structured individual and focus-group interviews and each participant received a copy of the interview schedule prior to the actual interviews. Interviews were recorded and afterwards transcribed by a research assistant.

Archival search

A full-time employee of the Department of Information Technology at VUDEC assisted with additional archival information for this investigation. A list of relevant queries was provided, which captured the history of the institution, the demographic characteristics of Council, management, and employees, programmes offered by the institution, and research output. The information was gathered and returned within three weeks.

Exploration of data

After the completion of the individual and focus group interviews, all recorded interviews were transcribed by a research assistant. The Institute for Education Research provided a framework for the reporting of the research data, which also served as a guideline for the analysis of the data. Owing to the qualitative nature of the semi-structured interviews and the quantitative nature of the data obtained through the archival search, a content analysis process was followed in exploring the data. Data were grouped according to predetermined themes as proposed by the Institute, which include, amongst others, the history of the institution in terms of its mission, identity, values, and founding; the nature and practice of governance, management and leadership; and the institutional culture in the changing conditions of higher education. After saturating these themes, data were further analysed for emerging themes. A line-by-line examination of the recorded data provided rich information for the proposed themes, as well as for the development of new themes (Berg, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). What follows is a discussion of the main themes and related sub-themes which emerged during this investigation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As it was our wish to stay close to the participants' feelings and thoughts as they related to the focus of inquiry, we made minimum use of interpretation, rather allowing the participants' voices to remain the centre of the analysis (Maykut & Morehouse, 2001). Through content analysis we were able to report the original opinions and perspectives of participants, as proposed by Berg (1998). The qualitative exploration of interview data was supplemented with the quantitative data derived from the archival search. Through triangulation these informative sources of data (De Vos, 1998) contributed to a dynamic

and comprehensive overview of the institutional culture of VUDEC. In view of its existence as one of eight campuses, an investigation into the VUDEC institutional culture cannot be isolated from Vista University at large. The discussion that follows attempts to present an integrated picture of VUDEC's culture as well as that of Vista University at large. The themes and related sub-themes are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Main themes and related sub-themes

Historical overview
- A university to cater for poor black communities - Development into a community-based university
Institutional transformation
- Students studying at their own pace - Teaching, research and community services - Management divided - Collaborations with other institutions - Curriculum transformation - Uniqueness of academic programmes
The working environment
- Treating people as equals
The earmarking for incorporation
- Unbundling of Vista University - A positive decision from Government

Historical overview

A university to cater for poor black communities

In 1978, the Government appointed a commission of inquiry to investigate the tertiary needs and requirements of urban blacks in South Africa. The Commission submitted its report to Government in 1980 proposing the establishment of Vista University. The new institution came into being on 1 January 1982 in terms of Act 106 of 1981 (Vista University Calendar, 2003, p. 8). In April 1982, The Vista University Further Training Campus with fifteen staff members was established in Pretoria and took over the function

of teacher education from the then Department of Education and Training. In 1998, the name of the campus was changed to Vista University Distance Education Campus (VUDEC). VUDEC was the first established campus of the eight campuses of Vista University's multi-campus functioning structure. The initial purpose of VUDEC was to offer diploma and certificate courses to black practising teachers to enable them to upgrade their qualifications with a view to possible entry into graduate studies (Vista University Calendar, 2003, p. 8).

The establishment of Vista University was therefore first and foremost a political step aimed at providing tertiary education to black communities who, according to a participating lecturer *government did not want in the former white universities, and could not hide in the universities in the so-called homelands*. The political motivation for the establishment of the institution was accompanied by economic and social reasons of affordability and convenience, as reflected by a member of governance: *with the establishment of campuses in the townships and by avoiding additional cost of accommodation, higher education became more easily attainable, affordable, on your doorstep*. Another member of governance also acknowledged that the economic and social reasons were directly linked to *the unpopular political reason, and although it is a very bad record for establishment, it had a very good impact on communities*. A third member of governance agreed and reflected on the challenge of maintaining academic standards: *At the same time it had to be excellent as well*.

In terms of VUDEC's fulfilment of its social responsibilities, a member from governance reflected: *We catered for the poorest of the poor. We opened doors for people when nobody else used to want them. We are giving people a chance to develop – the late developer – we have given the poor people a chance to come in and the education have been cheaper than most. It will be a pity if that is lost in the merger process, because that is what we do, and we do it very well*.

Development into a community-based university

Vista University developed into an institution which steered social and economic development and saw itself as a community-based university. A member of governance pointed to the university's role of providing *education for all and to help those who have an educational background that could be regarded as disadvantageous to help them into the higher education system and higher education*. She continued to argue that the responsibility of the institution was *to give learners the idea that they have social conscience as well, so it is not just a matter of getting a degree, but you have a social conscience to the country*.

Although VUDEC initially only specialised in offering certificates and diplomas, in 1996 Senate agreed to a request from VUDEC to offer degrees, which according to a member of governance *changed the faith of VUDEC and its responsibilities*. In 1997 a decision was taken to establish learner support centres. The member of governance continued to argue that: *This really brought us closer to our students. In fact, it was a significant achievement for VUDEC, because it gave a human face to Vista University, because students used to get the material without getting in touch with anybody else. This also gave a human face to our students and students could associate VUDEC with a centre, with tutors, with co-ordinators who are helping them*.

The increase in contact between lecturers and students was acknowledged by the participating students. With specific reference to the post-graduate programmes, a student reported that *the mode of delivery for the programme that I registered for is distance, well, it is not actually distance but full-time, and we are doing contact sessions twice a year*. This view was supported by another student: *It is always contact sessions. Sometimes they call up students to do workshops and research. We go to participate at the government department to speak about this subject. We do contact tuition*.

Institutional transformation

Students studying at their own pace

Owing to the fact that the upgrading of teachers' qualifications was for so long the main mission of the university, it is understandable that in 2003 the Faculty of Education still drew large numbers of students, nearly 40 per cent of the total 7738 students enrolled (Vista University ITS System, 2003). Between 1998 and 2003 the number of students in the Faculties of Management, Science, and Law showed a marked increase. With regard to postgraduate enrolments, the Faculty of Education had the highest number of students, with a significant increase in enrolment in the master's course-work programmes introduced in 2002 (Vista University ITS System, 2003).

A significant fact about VUDEC students was that they were increasingly starting to subscribe to the global demand of multi-skilled competencies. A lecturer in the Faculty of Law pointed to the fact that *students enrolled in the faculty are mainly full-time teachers studying for law degrees in an attempt to gain more marketable knowledge and skills than just teaching capacities*. The student profile with regard to race representation had also change slightly. Although the vast majority of students enrolled in 2003 were black, an administrative officer confirmed that in comparison with previous years, more white students enrolled at VUDEC.

As far as the academic competencies of VUDEC students were concerned, several participants shared the concern that at entry level, VUDEC students might not necessarily all have been of university calibre. A member of governance also acknowledged that VUDEC access standards were lower than those of many other institutions. However, he emphasised that *these lower access standards should not necessarily imply a lower university standard in general*. Students who would not have qualified to study at other universities were allowed to register at VUDEC and were encouraged to remain in the system for longer, while studying at their own pace regardless of how many years they would need to complete their chosen courses.

A lecturer raised a sceptical opinion about VUDEC's flexibility in admission requirements:

We let everybody come in. In recent years, when we were getting desperate for numbers, we let anybody and everybody come in, which wasn't good. Because we were closing our system, we were extending of labour with very little to show for it. Students were failing, dropout rates were high, failure rates were high and people won't pay. On the one hand, yes, you widen up access, but you do not guarantee survival. So you are cutting your own throat in a kind of way. What we need to do is to get more balanced in future. You can be charitable, you can be kind, but you ought to have to be practical and economical otherwise you won't succeed and you won't be any good to anybody because you'll be dead.

Against the background of the worldwide tendency of increasing convergence between 'contact' and 'distance' modes of delivery to the benefit of both, VUDEC's initial paper-based provision gradually changed to a more Open/Distance Learning (ODL) mode of delivery. Increasingly, VUDEC adhered to ODL by accommodating a multi-modal offering approach through the integration of different technologies. VUDEC had at its disposal sophisticated video-conferencing facilities for a face-to-face contact option with students in remote, rural areas.

Teaching, research and community services

In terms of the demands relating to teaching, research, and community services, participants agreed that VUDEC lived up to expectations. Although employees at VUDEC contributed to a lesser extent to research output, their commitment to teaching and community service was apparent. VUDEC's facilitation of HIV/AIDS programmes and the impact of these programmes on the community at large were highlighted by several participants in the study. An HOD reported that *this institution is really focussing on its social responsibilities. If I think of the HIV pandemic that's been going on as well as the upliftment of many black communities, our department is educating black pastors in many different life skills areas. We have already finished weeklong courses in Thembisa, Moroleteni, Hammanskraal, Bushbuckridge, Polokwane, all over, uplifting, upgrading, educating people on many subjects. The university is playing a tremendous role.*

Vista University, and VUDEC in particular, contributed significantly to the promotion of higher education in traditionally disadvantaged communities. An academic staff member reflected that *there are many teachers out there in schools that are VUDEC diplomates or graduates and they tend to engender the loyalty that we have spoken about. They basically encourage students to study through us. We are now getting those specialising at schools coming to us.* Participating students responded with enthusiasm when asked about VUDEC's social responsibility and contribution to higher education.

When the history of the institution is taken into consideration, it becomes clear that VUDEC was not originally established as a tertiary institution to cater for research. A member of governance argued that Vista University, and specifically VUDEC, always saw a lecturer as spending seventy five per cent of his or her time teaching, and the remaining twenty five per cent doing research and community services. Another factor that contributed to the limited research output by lecturers at VUDEC was the absence, or rather very small number, of postgraduate students. Although management supported research, practical considerations often made it impossible.

A member of governance reflected on the limited research output by academics at VUDEC: *When the lecturers here were asked to expand their teacher activities to include the BA degree and to become researchers themselves, not everybody could do it, because they weren't expected to. They came here mainly as teachers. Lecturers weren't expected to become researchers like any university anywhere in the world. People are finding difficulty with this. There are very few people here who continue to do research or could fit into what a real university is supposed to be like. One is supposed to teach and be a researcher at the same time. But we are teachers then researchers, finding it difficult to reconcile both at this point.*

Lecturers agreed that research output of VUDEC employees was not very high. Although the institution placed great emphasis on the need for research and research output, circumstances did not always favour those who wished to engage in research investigations. The situation at VUDEC also differed from that on the contact campuses. As a consequence

of the drop in student numbers on the contact campuses, lecturers gained more time to devote to research activities. However, it seemed that the circumstances remained unfavourable for the promotion of research. A member of governance compared the research output at Vista with other tertiary Education institutions: *If you compare us to the historically white universities and institutions it is poor. But compared to historically black universities [HBU] and looking at our size and structure of multi-campuses, we do quite well. We do two thirds of the way up on research in the HBU. All the HBUs are suffering from a lack of postgraduate students. We have increased our research output during the last five years from 35 units a year to about 60 units a year and we beat MEDUNSA, which is a scientific university, hands down.*

Management divided

Vista University was historically mainly governed by whites. During its last decade of existence, the racial composition of the University changed, so that in 2003 it had predominantly black governance. What was still lacking according to a member of governance, and what one would expect to be addressed in the New South Africa, was gender balance. The University governance and campus management were still mainly male dominated.

As was the case with many other tertiary institutions in South Africa, Vista University attempted to broaden the composition of Council over the decade prior to the incorporation. Historically, Council consisted mainly of academics and other stakeholders (i.e., the Campus Registrars) who dealt with academic matters. This scenario underwent radical changes, as argued by a member of governance: *Vista has tried to make the membership of Council slightly broader. Student leadership, people on professional and academic sides serve on Council. The composition of Council is also made up of people internally and externally. Internal people come from a variety of backgrounds and externally the statutes of different knowledgeable persons determine who makes them on Council. For example there was a representative from government, the private sector, the municipality to make sure that it is balanced.*

The composition of Senate also changed during the decade prior to the incorporation. Originally HODs and full professors served in Senate. In this regard a member of governance reflected rather critically on the changes: *There was a kind of semblance that some kind of professionalism, some kind of expertise was operating at that level. With the democratisation process all of that changed and the HODs were thrown out, full professors were thrown out too. All kinds of other bodies came in which was not good. You have a lot of youngsters sitting there, they are democratic, very levelling, but at the same time we lost a great deal as far as discipline went, standards went and exactly what should be taught, how it should be taught and so on. We gained something, and lost a great deal more.*

Concerns regarding the transformed Senate were also shared by other academics. As indicated by one lecturer: *This is a bit of a negative comment and very uninformed, but I think we've seen the last few years a composition of Senate changing to HODs on, HODs off. In the period of HODs off one really got the feeling your department hasn't got a close link to Senate anymore. Secondly, as the whole merger scenario came on the table our impression that Senate as an academic top body starts treading water.*

When VUDEC's position as one of the eight campuses of Vista University was taken into consideration, the distinction between management at university and campus level became apparent. According to a member of governance, the management structure at Vista was a combination of centralised and decentralised management practices. Certain decision-making roles were extremely centralised, whereas Campus Principals had decentralised managerial functions. Decentralised campus-based management consisted of the Campus Principal, assisted by sub-heads or elected members of departments. They were responsible for making decisions regarding campus issues.

Management practice had been shaped in alignment with the political and socio-economic developments in the country. Historically, the management style of the university was hierarchical and authoritarian, and was dominated by white males, according to a participating Dean. Despite the fact that the management style became less hierarchical, she argued that *the hierarchy is here in the shadows, in the background. You can't very well get*

away from it and a lot of hierarchy have resulted in a lot of problems that we're having. At the same time we have become flatted. So a lot of things are happening at the same time, a lot of instability as well, and a lot of new things are coming which is not good. That leads to lots of problems. We are trying to re-establish some of the hierarchy, but it is not working very well, because democracy has gone a bit mad.

Campus committees played a central role in policy formulation and in the decentralisation of the institution. A member of governance expressed a rather sceptical opinion about the decentralised management of campuses and argued that *the way our campuses are, ideally the authority of the campus rests with the Campus Principal, who is assisted by the Campus Management Committee. But the nature of authority that has been developed is almost nil. All major decisions are taken from Central Campus. This has a direct influence on the merger because major decisions are not taken at campus level. For example, we have got a Merger Manager [at Central Campus] who has initially driven the process of the merger for all eight campuses. The Campus Management literally takes instructions from the Merger Manager.*

Committees within academic departments were supposed to run smoothly. This expectation was, however, hindered by the voluntary severance packages offered to employees in 2001. A member of governance explained that *this has had a really bad effect because we don't have sub-departments on the different campuses as well manned as they used to be. It became very difficult to carry out these strategies and to carry out even the committee work. We are sort of hobbling along trying to keep things together.*

In terms of the role of deans in the transformation of the higher education landscape, a member of governance reflected: *The Deans are supposed to keep the machine running, and at the same time you are also supposed to be a leader. For example, employing staff. You are supposed to get more people who were excluded in the past. Then the transformation of the curriculum...that was the main difficulty...it needs to become more OBE as well, more job-oriented. In the past, universities were very much their own bosses and we could dictate what we are going to teach, and students can come in if they want to*

and we are not going to change, not for anybody. But you got to suit the job market. The nature of the university is changing. They also have something called Executive Deans now. They get paid a little bit more and you are given more power to do things. At this institution, acting and so on, we are struggling to keep the machine going, more than anything else. Where there aren't any policies you try and formulate policies and we try to keep up with it.

Other participants agreed that the major responsibilities rested on the shoulders of the Deans. According to a member of governance, the Deans were the managers of the faculties and *they either make it work or fail*. Another member of governance agreed: *The Dean is the academic manager of a particular faculty. I would regard him/her as the Chief Executive Officer of a faculty. But to what extent this has been put into practice at our institution, is difficult to tell*. This view was also supported by another member of governance, who argued that the Deans *play an important role in informing us on what is going on in the Higher Education landscape*. All participating academics did not share the same appreciation for the role the Deans were playing. One academic expressed the concern that not all Deans were necessarily providing the necessary information to their faculties: *I think the Dean is the academic leader in the Faculty. So he or she must play a major role in Higher Education and I don't think that is the case in our faculty. So definitely in the light of changes in Higher Education the role of the Dean must change in our Faculty*.

Collaborations with other institutions

Academic departments tended to form collaborations with other departments or organisations on a project basis rather than the university forming partnerships or collaborations at institutional level. Prior to the incorporation, several departments in the Faculty of Arts had entered into successful working relationships with the National Institute for Community Development (NICDAM). Both the Departments of Sociology and Religious Studies were actively involved in NICDAM initiatives, while the Department of Religious Studies collaborated with the Victor Frankl Institute in South Africa.

Some of the degree qualifications were only introduced at VUDEC over the final three to four years of the institution's existence. Academics still found themselves in the implementation phase of these programmes and consequently had few, if any, opportunities to engage in partnerships with other institutions. One of the lecturers in the Law Faculty reflected on the difficulties they experienced as a new faculty at VUDEC: *In our faculty we were supposed to be phasing in the fourth year level next year. Other institutions work in collaboration with the Black Lawyers' Association, who are working with final-year students or students at third-year level who do articles with them or they get into small workshops during the vacations. In the end they get a bursary or something like that. But with our students, we don't even know where some of them are, they are scattered all over the country and it is so difficult to get them together and to do those workshops since they run for weeks. We were thinking about inviting them [the Black Lawyers' Association] for next year, but it will be a very tough job.*

The Science Faculty collaborated closely with the University of Pretoria and the World Education Fellowship (WEF) while the Faculty of Education also entered national and international collaborations. According to a lecturer in the Faculty of Education, they offered the National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDP) in collaboration with the Gauteng Department of Education, while the course-work master's degree in Management and Administration was developed in collaboration with the University of Ohio in the United States.

Curriculum transformation

Curriculum transformation resided primarily with academic departments. A member of governance expressed the view that curriculum transformation was steered by the Faculties and the Deans in response to the current Higher Education Policy. Lecturers agreed that curriculum transformation had been addressed in most academic departments. According to a lecturer in the Faculty of Arts: *In many areas it has been reformed. I can just speak from my own department's side. We've had a biblical studies side and then we changed to a multi-religious side. I think many departments have changed. In the History Department things have changed. They are focusing more on African history.*

A lecturer in the Faculty of Management agreed and reflected on the obstacles that might have hindered the transformation process: *I and some other colleagues often had the feeling that, as happens in so many places, both governmental and in private companies that your environment changes and your market changes while you were unaware of it. Up to now we feel that sometimes when we have meetings and we discuss things like: do we register; let's go on decentralised registration; we should go here; we should go there; should go somewhere else; let's go on vacation school; do we go, don't we go; do we do more, do we do less? Many people are thinking against the paradigm of how it was. But these things have really changed. We haven't actually shifted there. Maybe none of us have really shifted there. Maybe we never really researched that enough to know what the current situation is.*

With regard to the paradigm shift towards africanisation and inclusion of indigenous knowledge in curriculum transformation, a lecturer in the Faculty of Science strongly argued that employees at VUDEC had a much better understanding of the new paradigm than employees at many other tertiary institutions: *Over the years, we got to know the needs of our students and we catered for that to a large extent, while some of the other institutions, especially some of the merger partners, have an academic focus and that's that.* A lecturer from the Faculty of Management agreed: *Sometimes things have two sides of a story. After what I've said it is also true that in many respects VUDEC was forced to change, and many people have a feeling for that.*

Uniqueness of academic programmes

The uniqueness of the academic programmes at VUDEC resided in the institution's focus on teacher training, and specifically in the further training of previously disadvantaged, mainly black groups. The focus however changed over the decade before the incorporation, with the inclusion of more diverse programmes. With regard to the training of previously disadvantaged groups, one HOD said that *this was a unique focus of VUDEC, which no other Higher Education [HE] institution performed so well in the country. This university could have been a powerful HE institution if we could have kept on focussing on teacher*

education. Against the background of the country's need for enough qualified educators, VUDEC could have been a major role-player.

VUDEC's uniqueness and the contribution it would make to the new comprehensive institution, was best summarised by an academic staff member in the Faculty of Science: *I've got hold of a document that outlines minister Kadar Asmal's ideas. He said "We should lay the foundation for the Higher Education system that is consistent with the vision, values, principles of a democratic order and which contributes to social and economic development". I think VUDEC/ Vista has been doing this all along, while the other institutions are perhaps not yet there. We've been doing this for a long time. The fact that we have different campuses, the fact that our fees are very competitive, the vacation schools that we offer, and the fact that we have loyal students whose unique problems are addressed on a personal level. I think all of those things make us rather unique.*

According to one of the administrative staff members, VUDEC administrative staff was production wise: *We are post-Fordist, already working with the whole process. We at VUDEC need to have all the skills and abilities to work through the whole process.* To this, a colleague responded: *I suppose there is a bad side to that too. It doesn't make you a master of all trades, whereas those people [at UNISA and TSA] specialise in what they do.*

The working environment

Treating people as equals

In general, participants were appreciative of the non-racist, non-sexist, democratic, and accommodative culture at Vista University during the period prior to the incorporation. A member of governance expressed her opinion of Vista's working environment: *It is nice to work for a university that does not have a patriarchal, race-based, sexist-based system. Vista treats people as equals, with value, and recognises good work when it sees it.*

Another member of governance also expressed appreciation for the accommodative character of Vista by pointing out that the management style at the institution changed from an initial strict, rigid, *paternal uncle approach* to an extremely *laissez faire, liberal maternal uncle approach*. Although a *laissez faire* approach was not ideal, she expressed

the opinion that it was a wonderful environment to develop in, provided that employees maintained sound work ethics: *It was very strict, it was rigid, you knew exactly where you were, and what you could do and what you couldn't do. It was very tight, in a kind of way depressive. On the other hand, with the loosening up of all of that and the transformation that we've been through, things got loosened up to such an extent that there was nothing in your floating around... doing nothing. But, even in that kind of atmosphere, I found, for me, that if you have the work ethic, there are lots and lots of room at Vista. Today Vista is the freest, loveliest place to work, if you use it properly. There are lots and lots of opportunities, so in a kind of way it was like a very liberal maternal uncle Vista became, after being a feared paternal uncle, but lots of people are abusing this freedom.*

Participating lecturers agreed that the quality of caring and personalised services offered at Vista University, and particularly at VUDEC, was exceptional. According to an administrative officer, support services at VUDEC were extremely personalised insofar as that students had personal contact with administrative personnel when approaching the institution in connection with matters relating to, for instance, outstanding study material or matric results. A member of governance emphasised the quality of personal contact and active interaction between lecturers and students, and between administrative staff and students, but pointed out that such personal contact was possible only in an environment where students numbers are relatively small, as was the case with VUDEC with its total of around 8 000 students.

The earmarking for incorporation

Unbundling of Vista University

A member of governance summarised VUDEC's position in the transformation in higher education as follows: *This [Vista University] is the second largest university in the country. We had a large number of students, we were thriving, we were prosperous. We were not perfect. But in order for us to implement change you have to have an economic viable unit and then the change will be easier, or it should be easier. What we have here in the process of changing and transforming ourselves, that we have forgot that we were a university. I think Kadar Asmal stepped in, because he saw that all the universities of this country, we*

were still very much black or very much white and he needed to step in and do something about it. We wouldn't have done it. Because we are reluctantly forced into it now, it is a great deal more than the conservative nature of universities. This affects all of us and nobody likes change. Those are the big national reasons and at the same time I think we are running downhill very fast. With all the change that is taking place and with the universities opening up students could go anywhere they liked. Our student numbers were dropping. Given all those reasons, and the fact that we weren't doing too well, I think that is why we are going to be incorporated – not merged – incorporated, because Vista has been broken up in bits and pieces.

Several participants raised concerns about the unbundling of Vista University and the major impact it would have on the institutional culture. A member of governance summarised as follows: *Had we gone as a whole unit, we could probably speak about merging, we'll be equals with other people. But we are not equals right now, because we are all going in different directions, and I think they have settled on the term now, it is going to be incorporation. On the surface it looks as if you are going to have the ability to assert yourself and to take term under which you might be incorporated, but in practice it won't work that way.*

A positive decision from Government

Although two contradictory opinions prevailed with regard to the incorporation of VUDEC into the comprehensive new Unisa, the vast majority of participants evaluated the incorporation as being a positive decision from government's side, with benefits for students, lecturers, and the country as a whole. Benefits for the country related to the economic demand for producing the right calibre of human resource material for survival and development within the sphere of an increased appeal to world market competitiveness.

With regard to the *right calibre of student*, the opinion prevailed that in general institutions that were earmarked for merging are those that accommodate the wrong calibre of person in terms of economic reasons, such as academic dedication, intellectual competencies, and academically inclined future-oriented directedness (Jansen, 2003). As far as intellectual

competencies and the calibre of student that enrolls at VUDEC were concerned, the notion prevailed that many of these students should rather have enrolled at less academically oriented higher education institutions. In the light of VUDEC's marketing focus on students who couldn't pay or pass, and against the background of the incorporation into the Unisa-TSA merger, a member of governance expressed the opinion that the incorporation exercise was the result of a positive decision taken just in time.

A participating lecturer pointed to the fact that a major drawback of the incorporation of VUDEC was that students with special needs in terms of money and attention would disappear from the higher education scene. He further emphasised the need for special arrangements to be put in place to keep on accommodating such students: *One drawback that we might have to give attention to is that we do have students with special needs in the sense of money and attention, and one will have to put structures in place to prevent those students from just disappearing, or not getting what they enrolled at VUDEC for, which is personal attention and constant availability of lecturers.*

A member of governance also confirmed the presence of a special-needs group of VUDEC students: *During our short history of existence we have managed to establish ourselves as a people's university because we are very much affordable. We are situated where most of the disadvantaged people in the townships are living.*

The *right calibre of human resource material* referred not only to students with academically inclined dedication and appropriate study competencies, but also to students gaining the right kind of knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for economic purposes. In this regard a lecturer in the Faculty of Management pointed to the fact that the economy of this country needed more peoplepower with public finance knowledge and skills than with environmental economics training. Regardless of this economic need, however, VUDEC kept on focussing on training vast numbers of environmental economists: *We do have in the Faculty of Management people who are selling traditional ideas about programme selection. Some of the things that Vista tried to do, to our mind, were well intended but they went a bit the wrong way. For example, we had some BCom degrees focussing heavily on*

Environmental Economics for which there are probably, according to experts, only scope for about 30 environmental economists in South Africa. But we've got no undergraduate programmes in Public Finance and the Department where I used to work often told me that they have many employees who would have loved to come to VUDEC but we do not have the right marketable modules.

Focussing on the benefits offered by the incorporation of VUDEC into Unisa for academics in particular, the vast majority of participating academics at VUDEC were looking forward to working in a more academically inclined university environment in which they can focus on their academic/research-oriented competencies. To quote a lecturer in the Faculty of Management: *We really believe that this incorporation offers more opportunities for lecturers of VUDEC to blossom as academics.*

A lecturer in the Faculty of Arts agreed: *At VUDEC there are competent academics who are highly qualified, but their competencies are not optimally used and appreciated. I honestly think their expertise can be used in a better way. They can get a much better life in a more academic environment within this incorporation/merger.* However, not all VUDEC employees shared this positive approach towards the incorporation. It seemed employees in management positions were uncertain of their futures, particularly since VUDEC and Unisa were not equal partners in this incorporation. A member of governance said that *to be honest, I don't think it was the choice of Vista to be in the merger. If we had our own way, we would stay as we are. A major problem is that the Minister has decided that all eight campuses of Vista University are not going to merge but are going to be unbundled and be incorporated. That is a huge disadvantage because now we are not equal partners.*

It became clear that employees in academic departments were more positive with regard to the benefits of the incorporation for good calibre students and lecturers. However, it seemed that employees in managerial and administrative positions with no specifically developed expertise in the case of the latter, experienced the incorporation less positively.

On the eve of the incorporation, employees were intensely aware of the challenge of

adopting a new institutional culture and new working environment, while negotiating individual positions. In the words of a member of governance: *The biggest challenge is to let go of the past and to embrace the new. That seems to be very difficult for people to do. The new challenge is in terms of embracing the national imperatives addressed in the national plan for higher education access equity, efficiency, but I think it is matter of conceptualising an institution that can meet the NQF imperative of having articulation, of coming up with new types of programmes, of being transformed in all aspects in having a social and economic conscience. I think people have long histories of the institutions that they don't really want to let go of and so to embrace a new culture is difficult. However, you must be careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater and ensure that you take the best of the past with you in creating the new. So you need to hold on to certain things or you need to carry certain things with you but you need to let go of the past. I think that is the biggest issue for most institutions to do.*

A member of governance warned that employees would need to look after their own interests while showing an awareness of the larger goal of transformation: *First of all, the basic challenge is keeping your job. The next challenge is we are restructuring, yes, in order to develop new kinds of institutions.* As the reality of the incorporation was sinking in, a member of governance advised: *I think we need to sit down, review, reflect upon ourselves and we need to get ourselves in shape.*

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Allow expressions of nostalgia and grief for the past; then create excitement about the future. (Pollack, 2003, p. 11)

After twenty-one years of existence, Vista University closed its doors in December 2003. By incorporating the university's eight campuses into larger tertiary institutions within each respective region, its programmes and institutional culture were either integrated into the receiving institutions' curricula or phased out. This brought an official end to a university with a unique and diverse dynamic multi-campus culture. In reflecting upon the key components of the institution's culture, members from governance, academics,

administrative staff, and students embraced the institution's contribution to the South African higher education landscape. Over more than two decades, Vista University succeeded in its goal to offer tertiary education to thousands of students, mostly from disadvantaged black communities, not only to students from every corner of South Africa, but also to students in other parts of Southern African, specifically the neighbouring countries of Zimbabwe, Botswana, and Namibia. Although the establishment of Vista University was a political step and originally received with resistance, the institution contributed to affordable and convenient tertiary education. Students who would not have qualified to study at other tertiary institutions – especially during the apartheid era – were allowed to enrol at Vista and encouraged to remain in the system while studying at their own pace.

During the first few years of the post-apartheid era in South Africa, Vista University was often perceived as a micro-cosmos of the transformation processes still to be confronted by industrial and tertiary institutions. Due to the history of the institution as well as the geographical locations, black academics and administrative already formed part of the institutional landscape. While literature emphasises effective communication as vital in every phase of a merger or incorporation (Cartwright & Cooper, 1996; Price, 1999; Tetenbaum, 1999), Vista University Management prohibited any contact – formal or informal – between individuals and departments with their counter partners at either Unisa or TSA.

Bergquist (1992) identified four academic culture archetypes reflecting any higher education institution: collegial culture, managerial culture, developmental culture, and negotiating culture. He highlighted how the managerial culture might hinder an institution's ability to change and consequently impact on the negotiating culture of the institution and its members. It became quite clear that negotiating positions in the new merged institutions was difficult and even impossible in the months prior to the incorporation. By the time of the interviews reported on in this manuscript, employees were still in the dark as to how they would be integrated into the new institution. It was therefore not surprising that employees were holding on to the familiar and mostly feared the unknown immediate and

long-term future. Evidence of the first four stages of the merger syndrome, which could also be referred to as the incorporation syndrome – denial, fear, anger, and sadness (Hunsaker & Coombs, 1988) – were highly visible amongst employees. A strong sense that the incorporation would not take place was especially evident amongst employees in administrative departments, while academics viewed the incorporation as unavoidable in the light of transformation of higher education in South Africa.

Anderson (1999) is of the opinion that mergers provide an opportunity for sweeping change, and can be implemented to create a stronger and more resilient institution.

Humphrey (2003) however warned that breaking links with the old institution is difficult at individual staff member and institutional levels. The ease of integrating the institutions is affected by the compatibility of the different cultures, the strength of each culture, and the type of merger (Anderson, 1999). According to Appelbaum et al. (2000) merger managers need to take cognisance of the fact that employees are losing the old way of doing things within their institution and are now being told to adopt a new system, culture and most probably new managers and administrators.

A merger seems to be one of the most significant events an institution may engage in (Harman & Meek, 2002) and for some institutions a merger or incorporation may mean that they cease to exist, at least in their pre-merger form. Harman and Meek (2002) stated that there are few ‘true’ mergers, both in the educational and commercial worlds. The more common practice is that one institution takes over another, while few if any mergers are painless. Hofstede (1997) is of the opinion that if people are moved as individuals they will adopt to the culture of the new institution, but when people are moved in groups they will bring their group culture along. Hofstede (1997) further reported cases where traces of the original merged cultures could still be found twenty years after the merger took place. Merger literature generally agrees that it can take up to ten years for the wounds to heal and for the new institution to operate as a cohesive and well integrated whole (Harman & Meek, 2002).

Horwitz et al. (2002) suggested that employee participation and integration teams might

allocate resources, co-ordinate, provide focus and guidance, improve morale, and enhance implementation effectiveness. Communicating the rationale behind the decisions, future goals and objectives, new roles and responsibilities, and managerial expectations through constructive dialogue and feedback, are vital to build trust and ensure credible leadership (Horwitz et al., 2002). In the apparent absence of clear direction and open communication during the months prior to the incorporation, it was not surprising that employees, and in the case of Vista University, management in particular, resisted the process. Keup, Walker, Astin, and Lindholm (2001) argued that resistance is an important cultural component of transformation that is often overlooked. According to these authors, it is especially relevant to colleges and universities in the light of their longstanding tradition of criticism and a wide variety of sub-cultures. Sub-cultures – based on organisational role, institutional position or disciplinary affiliation – often flourish within the university environment, supporting their own set of customs, beliefs, and practices that may be incongruent with the larger institutional culture, and with the goals of most transformation efforts (Clark, as cited in Keup et al., 2001).

The importance of institutional culture and institutional values, myths, metaphors, and symbolic boundaries throughout the process of institutional change cannot be emphasised enough according to Simsek and Louis (1994). In their ‘paradigm-shift’ model, these authors suggested the outcome of successful transformation is an alteration of institutional culture in the direction of desired change. These authors further proposed this model of the change process as a good fit for institutions of higher education as it acknowledges aspects of the old paradigm(s) – prevailing culture – while incorporating it into the newly adopted institutional culture, rather than undergoing a revolutionary cultural change. Buono (2005) argued that rather than trying to change an institution’s culture, the focus should rather be on significant behaviours and interactions. Although institutional cultures often clash during mergers and incorporations, it is not the cultures themselves that pose the problem, but rather how these cultures shape and influence behaviour (Buono, 2005).

An understanding of institutional culture is clearly important to the study and preparation for institutional transformation. At the same time, as argued by Keup et al. (2001),

institutional culture and cultural change can be used as a means of preparing an environment for transformation, monitoring whether or not a transformational change has actually taken place and a means of achieving the desired results of an innovation.

NOTE

1. This investigation was co-conducted with Dr Hettie van der Merwe from the Department of Further Training at VUDEC. See van der Merwe, H. M. (2007). The VUDEC merger: A recording of what was and a reflection on gains and losses. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 21(3), 537–551.

ENDNOTE

This is the second of a series of manuscripts based on my D Litt et Phil research investigation of the incorporation of VUDEC into the merger between Unisa and TSA under the title: *Mergers in higher education: Towards a survival kit for conserving the self*.

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MANUSCRIPT 3

THE CHANGING HIGHER EDUCATION LANDSCAPE: ESTABLISHING A NEW IDENTITY DURING AN INSTITUTIONAL INCORPORATION

In view of the restructuring of the South African Higher Education landscape, this manuscript reports on a longitudinal investigation into how employees from an incorporated sub-division of Vista University experienced the implementation of the incorporation process over four years. Interviews were conducted with 24 participants from both academic and administrative departments, and their responses analysed in terms of social identity theory. Through thematic analysis the core themes of institutional culture and identification with the new institution were identified. The investigation further highlights the need for effective communication and guidance from management, the integration of institutional cultures, social support, and opportunities for debriefing.

Keywords: communication; institutional culture; institutional incorporation; mergers; merger syndrome; psychological well-being; sense of continuity; social identity theory

‘Unisa and TSA are the two elephants, they are making the love . . . and VUDEC is the lawn on which they are making the love’ a senior colleague said rather ironically at one of the pre-merger planning meetings at Vista University Distance Education Campus (VUDEC). On 1 January 2004, the University of South Africa (Unisa) merged with Technikon South Africa (TSA); on the same date VUDEC, a sub-division of Vista University, became officially incorporated into the new comprehensive Unisa. The implementation of the incorporation was scheduled from this date until January 2008 (Merger Managers, 2003). This manuscript reports on how employees from VUDEC experienced the incorporation and the process of becoming members of the new institution over the four year implementation period (see Note 1).

Cultural dynamics and human resource implications of mergers

Buono (2005) warned that too often incorporated institutions' management and employees are ill prepared to face the complex implementation dynamics once the decision to merge is made. He further argued that the strategy underlying a specific merger determines the unique aspects of the level of integration necessary, the speed with which the integration should be achieved, and the manner in which the integration should be planned and implemented. Allen and Sharar (2000) stated that there is much distance between the planning of a merger and the execution and implementation stages. Like most complicated institutional decisions it is easier to move boxes around on an institutional chart than to predict the impact of the movement on the people involved (Allen & Sharar, 2000). In investigating the similarities in the processes of stepfamily formation and institutional mergers, Murphy (1998) argued that being involved in a merger can be just as stressful as being involved in a divorce and re-partnering process. Murphy (1998) further argued that the rhetoric that *people are our greatest resource*, which is often emphasised in merger literature, seldom appears to inform actual merger practices.

An emergent field of enquiry in merger literature has been directed at the cultural dynamics of mergers (see also Fourie, 2008a) and the emotional and behavioural response of employees involved. The literature, with its diverse origins in the disciplines of psychology, organisational behaviour, and human-resource management (Cartwright & Schoenberg, 2006) has sought to explain merger under-performance in terms of the dysfunctional impact that the event itself, the associated uncertainties, and the process of integration have on individual institutional members.

Although problems ascribed to human aspects have been blamed for a substantial number of merger failures (Cartwright & Cooper, 1993a; Schuler & Jackson, 2001), little attention has been paid to the reactions of employees (Freid, Tiegs, Naughton, & Ashforth, 1996; Nalbantien, Guzzo, Kieffer, & Doherty, 2005; Schweiger & Denisi, 1991) and the stress employees experience during the process (Cartwright & Cooper, 1993a; Lotz & Donald, 2006). In investigating the reasons for the negative reactions of employees to mergers, van Dick, Ullrich, and Tissington (2006) drew a comparison between the announcement of a merger and the weather, and argue that in psychological

terms a merger has an effect similar to that of a black cloud in the sky. People take appropriate precautions. On a personal level, employees' reactions to a merger lie in the fear of losing their jobs and the uncertain and damaging implications for personal well-being and security (van Dick et al., 2006).

Based on more than 100 articles and books in both academic and practitioner literature, Seo and Hill (2005) identified six theoretical approaches that have formed the basis for explaining employee's psychological and behavioural responses to merger-related organisational change. The theories include: anxiety theory; social identity theory; acculturation theory; role conflict theory; job characteristics theory; and organisational justice theory. The present investigation primarily makes use of the social identity approach.

Social identity and institutional mergers

Various authors (see Bartels, Douwes, de Jong, & Pruyn, 2006; Giessner, Viki, Otten, Terry, & Täuber, 2006; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Ullrich, Wieseke, & van Dick, 2005; van Dick et al., 2006; van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, Monden, & de Lima, 2002) turned to the social identity approach to explain why a merger creates a threat to the institution's identity and consequently to employees' social identification with the new institution. Mergers may be perceived by employees as a threat to the stability and continuation of their current identities, and Bartels et al. (2006) argued that employees may resist merger processes especially when it implies a serious threat to existing group values, structures, or other manifestations of their group culture. This will be even more so when the work or group serve as an important aspect of the employee's personal (self) identity (Bartels et al., 2006).

The social identity approach provides a theoretical framework based on social identity theory and self-categorisation theory (Cornelissen, Haslam, & Balmer, 2007; Ullrich et al., 2005). According to *social identity theory*, the social groups we belong to form a significant part of our self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In contrast to our personal identities which reflect our characteristics as unique individuals (Kavanagh & Ashkanasy, 2006; Ullrich et al., 2005), social identity theory refers to the aspects of our self-concept in which we see ourselves as being similar to others of our social group as *social identity* (van Dick et al., 2006). Because of the embedding of group membership

in the individual's self-concept, he or she will to a greater or lesser extent think, act, and have feelings consistent with the group's values and social standing.

Numerous studies (see Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Giessner et al., 2006; Haslam, 2004; Haslam, Postmes, & Ellemers, 2003; Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004; Ullrich et al., 2005; van Knippenberg & van Leeuwen, 2001) have shown that the institution, the department, and the workgroup are important objects for employees to identify with. In view of the amount of time individuals spend at work (van Dick et al., 2006) and the fact that people's work and occupational status often play a prominent role in their lives (Bartels et al., 2006), it is theoretically plausible that work institutions provide such social identities (van Dick et al., 2006). It is further argued that group membership transforms individual interest and motivation into collective interest and motivation (Giessner et al., 2006), and perceptions of consequences to the group should therefore impact on individual evaluations and decisions (Haslam, 2004).

Haslam (2004) argued that *organisational or institutional identity* is in effect a particular form of social identity – one associated with membership of a specific institution or institutional unit (Cornelissen et al., 2007) – that represents the distinctive attributes that employees' associate with their membership in the institution (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Haslam et al. (2003) suggested that institutional identity is both a psychological and social reality as well as a mental and material fact. According to Cornelissen et al. (2007) it encompasses both the cognitive categorisation processes that take place in the minds of individuals and the collective activities and products to which these processes lead. Strong identification with the institution is generally desirable for the well-being of the institution and its members because highly identified employees derive a high component of their self-esteem from belonging to the institution and working towards its goals (van Dick, 2001).

Theoretically, it could be expected that institutional mergers should alter an employee's identification since the merger changes or dissolves the boundaries of the distinct groups within the newly created merger entity (van Dick et al., 2006). Employee reactions to a merger vary systematically depending on how much the merger is perceived to impact on the pre-merger institution's identity and consequently posing a threat to employees' institutional identification (van Dick et al., 2006). Brown (2001)

suggested that investigating identity and identification within and across institutional contexts should include multiple levels of analysis, including for example individual, group, institutional, and cultural levels.

Bartels et al. (2006) argued that one would expect a negative relationship to exist between pre-merger identification with the incorporated institution and post-merger identification with the new institution, especially in cases where employees exhibited a strong social bonding with the pre-merger institution. Research has, however, indicated that the assumption about a negative relationship may not be as clear-cut as expected, and studies (see van Dick, Wagner, & Lemmer, 2004; van Knippenberg et al., 2002) found a positive relationship between pre- and post-merger identification. Explanations for such positive relationships include the relatively limited consequences of the merger as perceived from the post-merger situation, where employees were able to transfer components of their old identity into the new institution. Jetten, O'Brien, and Trindall (2002) found it relevant to distinguish whether employees identified themselves primarily with the workgroup or with the institution as a whole, since a strong workgroup identification in the pre-merger phase may lead to negative feelings about the merger. Although a strong post-merger identification was not expected in Jetten et al.'s (2002) investigation, a strong super-ordinate institutional identification – with the institution instead of with the workgroup or department – led to more positive feelings about the merger. Another possible explanation for the positive relationships between pre- and post merger identification in the above mentioned studies, is the fact that pre-merger identification was investigated from the perspective of a post-merger situation and employees were asked in retrospect to what extent they identify with the new institution (Bartels et al., 2006).

Institutional change during a merger

Numerous studies emphasised that institutional change such as a merger may create job insecurity and challenges to employees' self-esteem and well-being (Cartwright & Cooper, 1993a, 1993b; Kavanagh & Ashkanasy, 2006; Lotz & Donald, 2006). Mergers are associated with culture change, and when that occurs, employees become aware of the change in measuring tools for performance and loyalty. The threat to institutional values and lifestyles leaves employees defensive, which is accentuated by culture shock and lower levels of trust within the institution (Kavanagh & Ashkanasy, 2006). Schuler

and Jackson (2001), therefore, emphasised the importance of people in the process of synergy realisation following a merger and argue that a substantial number of mergers fail due to the neglect of human resource issues.

Very seldom two institutions of equal status merge (van Oudenhoven & de Boer, 1995) and this may consequently lead to an accentuation of inter-group status differences (Kavanagh & Ashkanasy, 2006). In practice, according to Ullrich et al. (2005), there are always an incorporated and incorporator institution, and there is virtually always a power differential between both groups. The dominant institution inevitably turns out to be more influential in defining the character of the new institution (van Knippenberg & van Leeuwen, 2001). Employees of a low status incorporated institution may experience the merger situation as more threatening, resulting in more negative responses to the merger, than members of the high status incorporator institution (Terry & O'Brien, 2001). Members of the incorporated institution may suffer from feelings of worthlessness and may feel inferior because of the loss of autonomy and status (Kavanagh & Ashkanasy, 2006), less sense of continuity of their pre-merger group (Giessner et al., 2006), and may expect the members of the incorporator institution to dominate the merger (Dackert, Jackson, Brenner, & Johansson, 2003).

While the majority of previous research in investigating group differences in responses to mergers found negative outcomes for the employees of the incorporated institution, Panchal and Cartwright (2001), in their investigation of field sales employees, found that employees from the dominant incorporator group reported the highest levels of stress and the most negative work attitudes. Employees from the incorporated group were significantly more satisfied with their jobs and more committed to the organisation than the employees from the incorporator group. Panchal and Cartwright (2001) interpreted these findings in the light of social identity theory and argue that the merged organisation did not provide the incorporator group with a positive social identity, and employees consequently disidentified with the organisation in an attempt to maintain self-worth.

Coping with change during a merger

Building on the position that the two most important factors associated with increased employee stress during a merger are uncertainty and insecurity (Beckmann, 2003),

Hunsaker and Coombs (1988) identified patterns of emotional reactions experienced by employees during a merger. They labelled this phenomenon the *merger-emotions syndrome*. Various authors (Astrachan, 1990, 1995; Cartwright & Cooper, 1996; Marks, 1999; Marks & Mirvis, 1998) have contributed to the development of the model of employees' emotional reactions to a merger, which is better known as the *merger syndrome*. Behaviour associated with the merger syndrome usually occurs after the initial announcement of the merger and is characterised by employees' tending to become withdrawn and preoccupied with their own position and survival, whereas institutions tend to focus on crisis management (Fourie, 2008b).

On a personal level, employees, especially those from the incorporated institution, may go through a state of culture shock which leads to a reduction in job performance and resistance to change, enhanced by feelings of fear, betrayal, and anger (Stahl & Sitkin, 2001). Institutions often adopt a crisis-management mode, characterised by a decrease in communication and an increase in centralised decision-making. On a cultural level, dysfunctional culture clashes may lead to *us versus them* dynamics (Giessner et al., 2006), characterised by feelings of hostility and distrust.

Merger stressors during the implementation phase surface after the initial euphoria ends and practical considerations begin to impact on the emotions, feelings, and roles and responsibilities of employees (Allen & Sharar, 2000). Lotz and Donald (2006) stated that individual differences are expected as to how employees make sense of the changes due to the merger, which is, according to Taylor (1999), further influenced by the particular circumstances of the event. In examining how mergers cause high levels of stress and uncertainty amongst employees, Hubbard (1999) reported that non-managerial employees are almost as concerned about their colleagues and work groups as they are about their own job security. Ashkanasy, Hartel, and Duas (2002) reflected on various studies that show emotional contagion among work groups and indicate how one member's emotional display affects group performance. One group member's positive affect can, for example, lead to greater group co-operativeness, less conflict, and positive perceptions of change.

Contrary to previous research indicating that employees on different levels of the

institutional hierarchy tend to perceive and interpret transitional processes differently (Fairfield-Sonn, Ogilvie, & DeVecchio, 2002; Hubbard, 1999; Hunsaker & Coombs, 1988), Lotz and Donald's (2006) findings indicated no differences amongst managers, supervisors, and lower-level employees in the quantity or type of stress experienced during the merger. Lotz and Donald (2006) argued that due to the transformational nature of the change involved in the incorporation and the imbalance of power inherent in the incorporated-incorporator relationship, group composition shifts from being defined by hierarchical level to that of incorporated and incorporator groups. Employees' perceptions of inter-group differences in the new institution (Jetten et al., 2002), incompatible institutional cultures (Cartwright & Cooper, 1993b), and conflicting institutional identities (Melewar & Harrold, 2000), seem to refer to one underlying phenomenon, namely, that in merger processes employees feel threatened when their group is endangered by new identities (Bartels et al., 2006). They are consequently inclined to cling to the group that they are already part of (Bartels et al., 2006).

Given the magnitude and importance of employees' psychological reactions to merger outcomes, Morán and Panasian (2005) emphasised the importance of understanding the sources of the experienced stress and the way it affects the institution. This may then enable a reduction in employee resistance and hopefully lead to maximise synergy realisation (Morán & Panasian, 2005). Most research studies on human resource strategies in mergers are of a reactive nature and investigate human resource matters, such as the impact on employees for a relatively short period. Various authors (Cartwright & Schoenberg, 2006; Fugate, Kinicki, & Scheck, 2002; Kavanagh & Ashkanasy, 2006; Pikula, 1999) therefore proposed a longitudinal approach to the investigation into how individuals cope with an institutional merger. Ullrich et al. (2005) also advocated a process oriented approach to investigating subjective experiences of continuity during a merger, not only by the link between past and present, but also by the road map into the future.

As the only employee in the Department of Psychology at VUDEC, I seized the opportunity to make sense of and to explore the manner in which we, as employees from the incorporated institution, journey through the various stages of the incorporation process. The aim of the current investigation therefore was to provide a

rich thematic description of the experiences of employees from the incorporated VUDEC during the four year implementation process of the incorporation into the merger between Unisa and Technicon South Africa (TSA).

METHOD

Research context

The investigation formed part of a broader longitudinal study into the well-being of employees of VUDEC (the incorporated institution) during the incorporation into Unisa (the incorporator institution). During 2003 and prior to the current investigation, I have explored how employees from VUDEC prepared for the institution's incorporation during the pre-merger phase (see Fourie, 2008b) and embraced their institutional culture on the eve of the incorporation (see Fourie, 2008a). These two qualitative investigations set the stage for the continuation of interviews with employees from VUDEC as well as with other interested parties who could add richness and insight into the transitional and implementation process of the incorporation during 2004 till 2008.

Data gathering and participants

During the four years of this investigation, interviews were conducted with 24 participants. Through theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2000; Flick, 1999), employees from governance, academic, and administrative departments from VUDEC were invited to participate in this investigation, based on their availability and interest in the research topic. Employees from the Department of Human Resources (HR) at Unisa and from external organisations, with knowledge and experience of merger processes, were also interviewed, while an academic employee who had previously been employed at one of the Vista campuses, and who joined Unisa prior to the incorporation, was approached to participate.

The 24 participants consisted of 12 academics, 7 administrators, 4 HR consultants, and 1 member from VUDEC governance. At the onset of the investigation, the ages of participants ranged from 35 to 60 years, while the years of employment ranged from one to 18 years. Some participants had already participated in the two investigations during the pre-merger phase and were quite enthusiastic to continue their involvement in this investigation. Although most of the interviews were conducted individually, in three cases a small group of three to four participants, at their own request, took part in

focus group interviews. Interviews were conducted both in Afrikaans and English, and Afrikaans interviews were translated into English. See Table 6 for an outline of the demographic information of the participants.

Table 6. Demographic information of participants

Participant	VUDEC (V), UNISA (U), External (E)	Position	Gender	Race	Individual or Focus group	Number of interviews
1	V	HR consultant	Female	Black	I	2
2	V	Academic	Female	Indian	I	2
3	V	Academic	Female	White	F & I	4
4	V	Administrator	Female	White	I	1
5	E	HR consultant	Female	White	I	1
6	U	HR consultant	Female	White	I	3
7	V	Academic	Female	White	F & I	3
8	V	Administrator	Male	White	F & I	2
9	V	Administrator	Female	White	F	1
10	V	Administrator	Female	White	F	1
11	U	Academic	Female	White	I	2
12	V	Academic	Male	Black	I	2
13	V	Academic	Male	Black	I	1
14	V	Academic	Female	White	I	1
15	V	Academic	Male	White	F	1
16	V	Academic	Female	White	F	1
17	V	Academic	Female	White	F	1
18	V	Academic	Female	Coloured	F	1
19	V	Administrator	Female	White	I	1
20	V	Governance	Male	Black	I	2
21	V	Academic	Male	White	I	1
22	V	Administrator	Female	Black	F	1
23	V	Administrator	Female	Black	F	1
24	E	HR consultant	Male	White	I	2

Participation was on a voluntary basis and participants' informed consent was obtained prior to their entrance into the investigation. The identity of participants was protected and information was treated with confidentiality during all the phases of the investigation as well as in the final reporting. Participants were informed of the longitudinal nature of the investigation and follow-up interviews were conducted with 10 of the participants. Interviews were either conducted in the participants' offices, my

own office or a consultation room booked for the event. Due to their conversational and follow-up nature, interviews were not structured but based on my own experiences, insight gained from the pre-merger investigations, and the participants' own experiences and needs. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed and, where possible, transcripts were made available to participants for their verification, thus allowing participants to continuously reflect on their experiences of the process.

Thematic analysis of data

Qualitative approaches to data analysis are incredibly diverse, complex, and nuanced (Holloway & Todres, 2003). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis should not only be seen as a foundational method for qualitative analysis, but be considered a method in its own right, while Aronson (1994) argued that from conversations that take place for researching a process, ideas emerge that can be better understood under the control of a thematic analysis.

An inductive approach (Patton, 1990) was followed in identifying themes, allowing themes to be strongly linked to the data. As such, this form of data-driven thematic analysis bears some similarity to grounded theory (see Fourie, 2008b). The aim of the analysis was to proceed with the coding of data without trying to fit in into pre-existing coding frames (Braun & Clarke, 2006) or into my own analytical preconceptions. I do, however, acknowledge that my own interest and experience in the field of investigation as well as knowledge gained through the two pre-merger investigations, provided 'fore-having', 'fore-sight', and 'fore-conception' (Heidegger, 1962) which opened up possibilities for interpretation.

Thematic analysis as a recursive process involves a constant moving back and forth between the entire data set, the coded extracts of data that are being analysed, and the analysis of the data that are being produced (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis commences by familiarising oneself with the entire data set, while searching for patterns and meaning. During the second phase of analysis initial codes are generated by organising data into meaningful groups (Tuckett, 2005) and the third phase involves the sorting of different codes into potential themes by collating all relevant coded data extracts within the identified themes. In essence, the codes are analysed by considering how different codes may combine to form overarching themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Thematic maps as graphic representations (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006) were employed to assist in sorting the different codes into themes and sub-themes. Phase four involves the refinement of the identified themes through the re-reading of the collated extracts for each theme in order to consider whether they appear to form a coherent pattern. If this is in fact the case, the attention is turned to the entire data set and the consideration of the validity of themes in relation to the data set as well as whether the thematic network truly reflects the meanings evident in the data set as a whole (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006). After establishing a satisfactory thematic network of the data, in the next phase themes are defined and named by identifying the essence of what each theme is about. A detailed analysis is provided for each theme by identifying the story that each theme tells, as well as how it fits into the broader overall story of the data set in relation to the research question (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

RESULTS

Various themes came to the fore and were more evident during different stages of the four year implementation of the incorporation, leading to the identification of two global themes, namely (a) *institution culture* and (b) *identification with the new institution*. The discussion of themes is further divided into three levels: *individual*, *group*, and *institutional*. A thematic map of how general and basic themes lead to the identification of global themes is presented in Figure 1.

Institutional culture: Us & them

Individual level

In identifying with the new institution, employees found it difficult to leave the old and familiar behind, and this seemed to be an appropriate starting point to reflect on participants' life at the incorporated institution. On an individual level, participants mainly reported positive memories of their being employed at VUDEC and reflected on the opportunities gained and the impact of these opportunities on the development of their personal and academic skills. One academic reflected: *I will always remember Vista as a time of intense journey. In terms of my well-being I have learned a lot about myself*. While establishing new positions, it is not surprising that participants reflected on the appreciation that they had received at the incorporated institution, which

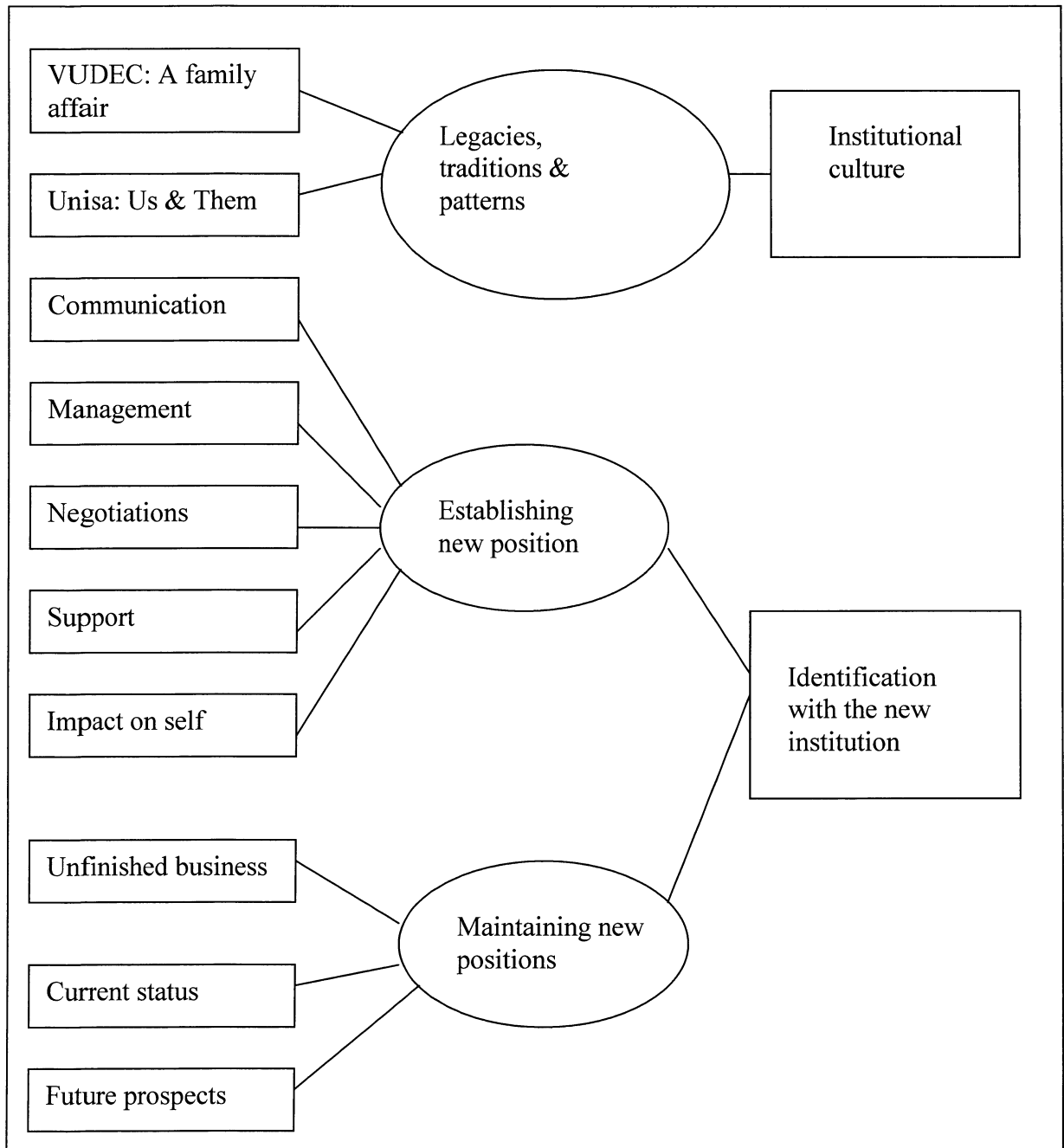


Figure 1. A thematic map of general, basic, and global themes

contributed to a sense of being valued and at the same time served as motivation for entering the new institution. One participant reported: *The experiences gained at Vista, we were exposed to a till z, and a little bit before that and a little bit beyond that. You know where you come from and you know where you are heading. I do have that knowledge and that gives me power.*

Mergers are often characterised as a period of intense uncertainty, especially for those from the incorporated institution. That was also the case in the current investigation, and participants critically reflected on the *time and energy wasted* during the period prior to the incorporation, while simultaneously realising its value in preparing them for the changes ahead. In the words of an academic participant: *I regret the amount of misery that I have allowed in my life over a long period, but I'm also convinced that it had its purpose in the bigger scheme of things.*

Personal experiences of becoming members of the new institution varied quite drastically. This was influenced by a variety of factors, including the number of employees from a specific department that accompanied the individual in the incorporation; number of years employed; position prior to the incorporation; and most evidently the climate within the incorporator department or unit. In general, a notion of *us and them* seemed to prevail, especially in the months immediately after the incorporation. Participants often reported a position of *being part of not being part of the new institution*, which was exacerbated by feelings of insecurity and mistrust in their interactions with and perceptions of their new colleagues.

In negotiating the phasing out of the incorporated institution's programmes and negotiating new positioning in departments or units, participants reported feelings of a lack of authority, experience, and knowledge. This was exacerbated by feelings of being perceived as inferior by their new colleagues, which impacted on participants' self-confidence and self-worth. During one of the focus group discussions, an academic stated: *I feel inferior when it comes to my colleagues, I feel more stupid than they are, I feel that they are watching me all the time. They talk behind your back. It wasn't my nature, but psychologically or emotionally I developed a different dimension.* On the other hand, participants valued the opportunities that were becoming available by joining a university with a *world wide reputation*, and valued the contribution that they could make, based on the experiences gained at the incorporated institution.

Group level

Almost all participants referred to their VUDEC colleagues as being part of a family. The policy of drinking tea together in the corridor on a daily basis became a metaphor

for a sense of community, as one academic employee reflected: *We created a culture of debriefing, the tea trolley effect, people got together and gossiped. It had a positive and negative effect – people could debrief and got rid of frustrations, but they also instigated each other – and a part of that still remained.* The fact that VUDEC was a relatively small institution, hosted in one building, allowed employees to know almost everybody working for the institution and to be familiar with the processes and the everyday running of business, as stated by an administrative participant: *We were a small group, we knew each other, we talked to one another on first name terms, we met frequently. We were more of a family, a healthy family life.*

Participants agreed that old loyalties remain. While forming new working relationship at Unisa, the special bond with colleagues from VUDEC will, according to participants precede every other relationship. An academic participant stated: *Strangely enough I find that the expatriate VUDEC community is closer to one another than they ever will be.* Therefore, establishing a new culture for the new merged institution seemed to pose one of the most challenging endeavours of the incorporation processes. It is inevitable that the incorporator institution has the more powerful position and consequently defines the new institutional culture. The long history shared by most members of the incorporator institution was perceived as contributing to aspirations to keep the status quo in place and to make things difficult for *outsiders*. An academic participant described the situation as follows: *Departments need to start negotiating, there is not going to be one acceptable way of doing things, one acceptable culture. That makes one anxious because it causes disputes. It makes the Unisa people uncomfortable. They have this perception: We have the better culture we know better, we have the better standards, so who are these people to come and tell us?*

On an interpersonal level, participants found it difficult and at times *almost impossible* to become part of established work-groups. Coming from a relative small institution added to the difficulty of becoming a role player in an enormously huge institution, as reflected by an administrative participant: *There is still the syndrome of: I'm a member from Unisa, from the old Unisa.* The dynamics and size of the new institution was perceived as far removed from the *family meeting at the tea trolley* in the corridors of VUDEC, as summarised by a member of governance: *Here you don't even know your neighbour, if he is a friendly person, fine you are lucky. At times you meet people in the*

lift, you say good morning, very few respond. I think it is an artificially inhuman environment.

Institutional level

While finding themselves being incorporated in the new institution, employees compared the old with the new, the familiar with the unfamiliar. Participants reflected on the role that VUDEC, and Vista University in general played in South Africa. The university's positioning in black townships allowed it to cater for disadvantaged communities, and students gained the opportunity to study in a user friendly environment (see also Fourie, 2008a). An administrative participant reflected: *That total open door policy we had. At Vista students just came without making an appointment, the staff will just help the student. That impressed me at VUDEC.*

Although an overall sense of euphoria was evident directly after the incorporation, participants acknowledged that due to the stormy history of the institution (see Fourie, 2008a) and transformation in the general higher education landscape, change was unavoidable. The cracks in the system became more visible during the years prior to the incorporation and support systems increasingly failed employees, as summarised by an academic: *When I think back of Vista, I think of systems that didn't work on many levels. It did however work on other levels. I think the students felt that it was more accessible for them, but regarding management, the infrastructure, people who were supposed to do their tasks, that didn't work for me. I felt that as a lecturer I had to know everything, I had to do everything I couldn't rely on back-up systems.*

The complex nature of VUDEC's position as one of nine campuses from Vista University and the consequent impact of centralised decision-making processes and communication by management contributed to the inevitable decline of the institution. The institution was originally perceived as progressive and successful in its purpose, but eventually characterised by a downhill movement towards the end of existence. A participant reflected: *I experienced years at Vista where we flourished and it felt as if we were going somewhere. But it changed suddenly, and in a very short time it went downhill. I believe that if we were not incorporated, we would have perished.*

In reflecting on the new institutional culture, discourses of race and power became evident. In comparing the transformation that VUDEC underwent during the years preceding the incorporation, participants raised concerns regarding a strong hierarchical system that still prevailed at Unisa. Perceptions of racial inequalities were especially raised by black participants during the months immediately after the incorporation, and the racial composition at Unisa was perceived as not yet effectively transformed and thus contributing to a strong *us and them* racial culture. An administrative employee stated: *There are some who make you feel that you are black and there is nothing you can do about it, it is still there. I miss Vista for that because at Vista we were all equal.* Another administrative employee strongly supported this view: *White will always be white and black will always be black. For instance in our department the blacks fear a white person. And I don't understand why because we have passed that stage... And I feel: No it is not the way things should be. We should not fear.*

The rather speedy transformation on managerial level was acknowledged by various participants. However, concerns were raised as to the transformation on the levels of middle management as well as on academic level, as summarised by an academic participant: *When it comes to racial issues, Unisa is not that transformed really. Because if you look at certain departments you find that it only a few blacks, or in some there are no blacks ... They say they are trying ... what happens is that they are looking only at top management. My worry is on the academic side.* Awareness of power issues regarding positions was further raised by various participants. Comparing to VUDEC where we all greeting each other on first name basis, participants experienced a strong sense of managerial hierarchy at Unisa, with the perception that *hierarchical positions need to be respected*. An administrative participant argued: *You are scared to walk into an office [of a senior member], you even think twice before you go there. Sometimes you find that they are not approachable.*

With the formation of the new institution, all role players are affected one way or another. Participants acknowledged that the incorporator institution and more specifically its employees also underwent a period of transition, characterised by change and uncertainty. An academic participant argued: *This is a wake-up call for them as well. Suddenly most people need to bargain for their own positions. And anxiety is*

provoked...seniority, years of service do not count anymore. And in an institution such as Unisa it is hard to undo.

Identification with the new institution: Establishing and maintaining positions

Individual level

Establishing new positions in departments or units were either facilitated or hampered by various factors. To begin with, most participants found themselves playing dual roles during the months following the incorporation. While still attending to the old VUDEC modules and systems and in most cases the phasing out of these modules and systems, participants experienced increasing pressure to become involved in Unisa programmes. In some cases however, VUDEC modules became integrated in the new curriculum and participants continued to facilitate these modules. Some administrative employees continued to work primarily with VUDEC processes, as pointed out by one participant: *I'm still the VUDEC lady and just a little bit part of Unisa.* This was echoed by another participant: *I think of myself working for Unisa but I'm still a little bit different from the others in the sense that I'm still busy with different things than most of the Unisa people.*

Due to the specific nature of their work, academics found themselves in better positions to negotiate their transition into placements and were consequently incorporated into academic departments with greater ease, while most administrative employees experienced intense uncertainty as to their placements during the months immediately after the incorporation. Administrative employees often found themselves incorporated in positions far removed from what they had been doing at the incorporated institution. It is therefore not surprising that academic participants reported on their experience of the incorporation in a more positive light. Given the decline of the incorporated institution, as well as the decline in student numbers and the expectations relating to transformation in higher education, various academic participants appreciated the opportunity to continue their professional lives in a larger and more established institution.

As in all transformation processes, the incorporation did have an enormous impact on the well-being of employees. Almost all participants raised concerns about finding themselves in uncertain times, exacerbated by inadequate guidance and communication

from management. This was however not new to VUDEC employees, as pointed out by an academic: *This is the fifth transformation that we are going through and we never received counselling. It is very important to debrief people to give them the opportunity to get it out of their systems.* Getting used to new ways of functioning and new structures, often with inadequate guidance and support, posed a major challenge to participants, as raised by an academic: *People who enter Unisa through a merger are confronted with a sharp learning curve in order to find out how the institutional culture, procedures, et cetera work. Consequently one follows a defensive approach. A pat on the back, some recognition, just to say that you are copying under the circumstances, can make a world's difference.* An administrative employee compared his journey into the new institution with his divorce: *Time heals. If I think of how traumatic my divorce of a twenty three year marriage was, but there is no more hate, no more blame or negative memories. One does not always take the negative with. The same applies here at Unisa. Time will tell whether one has adapted to the change.*

Towards the end of the incorporation process, most participants agreed that the incorporation had been successfully implemented and that, as individuals, they became part and parcel of the new institution. An academic summarised it as follows: *The whole process was far more smooth than one would have expected. Yes it was very positive.* New career opportunities flourished, enhanced by support systems that allow employees to continue investing in their professional careers. An academic quite enthusiastically emphasised: *There is no room for giving up. The sky is the limit.*

Established positions in the new institution, however, is not perceived as the end of the journey. Employees are continuously confronted with new challenges relating to the changing work environment and conditions of service. Institutional culture and an awareness of *I need to look after myself* were raised by various participants. The changing academic landscape challenges employees to continuously evaluate their positions in the new institution, as summarised by a participant: *It is all part of this institution. You must play it safe, you must play it clever, you must read the agenda, and really decide whether you can live with it, or can you compromise to a certain extent.* It seemed though that some participants felt that they did not foresee a personal future in the new institution and were considering other avenues: *I like having power, taking*

decisions, when I sit here I think I'm becoming more redundant. I am going to leave, I'm going to jump at that opportunity, I don't see opportunities here.

Group level

The dynamics of the incorporator department or unit and its members played a decisive role in how participating employees became integrated. Of note is the fact that some faculties, such as the Faculty of Education, were exposed to incorporating other smaller institutions in the recent past, and it most definitely contributed to a smoother incorporation. One participant reflected: *We had a very positive reception in our department. They went out of their way to find offices for us. The dean of our faculty was adamant from the word go: Get the VUDEC people in, make them part of the team, get them settled in.*

Participants reported a distinction between how employees from Unisa may have perceived them as individuals in comparison to VUDEC as institution. While VUDEC might have been perceived as a *millstone around their neck* and employees from the incorporator institution may *feel negatively about VUDEC as an institution coming in*, participants' perception were that they as individuals were received in a more positive light. A participant stated: *I think you must try and separate the reactions to the merger of the institutions and see the merger of individuals within departments as separate things, because the responses will differ.*

In becoming integrated in the new institution, participants found support from their colleagues who were jointly incorporated in respective departments, as stated by an academic: *No one is going to come and knock at your door and say this is where you get hold of study material these are the extensions... in that way I created a stronger bond amongst the three of us, it would have been difficult doing it in isolation.* Apart from the support by their immediate colleagues, the sense of family that was strongly present at the incorporated institution remained a source of support. A participant commented that *although we are scattered all over the place we remain a family but in a different way, we still care for each other.* Uncertainties during the various stages of the incorporation process were enhanced by a continuous lack of information regarding direction and procedures to follow and incorporated colleagues kept each other informed. Despite these uncertainties, the challenges and the variety of opportunities that opened up after

the incorporation were appreciated. One academic reflected: *There are things happening, I'm not totally distant from the rest of the department. The advantage is that you don't have to work on your own. There is a team to assist, and more variation on the collegial theme.*

Becoming a fully fledged member of the new institution seemed to be an enormous challenge for each individual. During the first few months following the incorporation employees needed time and opportunities to *prove themselves* as productive contributors to the incorporator institution. Developing relationships with new colleagues formed part of this process, as mentioned by one participant: *I'm still testing the waters, I'm starting to make new friends on some levels but I'm not sure yet whether this will be friends for life, or whether we will just be friends because we are at the same place at the same time.* Towards the end of the four-year incorporation, the majority of participants acknowledged the success with which they have become part and parcel of their respective departments and valued the manner in which their colleagues from the incorporator departments accepted them as members. Participants valued the contribution they were making and continued to make, as pointed out by an academic: *I want to change some of the things in my department, where I think they can benefit from the experiences we had at VUDEC. There may be resistance towards some of my ideas, so I think the challenge is to basically make sure that when I try to bring about change to do it in a way that will not seem as if I'm trying to oppose them but that I'm trying to work with them.*

Family ties established with colleagues from the incorporated institution during the period prior to the incorporation remained a strong supportive bond, as reported by an academic: *The expatriate VUDEC community is closer to one another than they ever will be.* Participants felt that *Vista is still with us* in the memories of employees and they continue to share *those romantic nostalgic ideas that keep people going* when meeting in the corridors or during meetings. Although a slight awareness of *us and them* remained present, participants appreciated the establishment of new working relationships in their respective departments or units.

Institutional level

Most difficulties with the incorporation process were experienced on institutional level. As in almost all mergers and incorporations, management, both from the incorporated and incorporator institutions, were blamed for not providing enough guidance and structure in the incorporation process. The fact that the incorporation was an external decision made by government, contributed to management being ill prepared and ignorant in providing the necessary structure and support, with consequences for employees from both incorporated and incorporator institutions, as summarised by a participant from HR: *Management was between the devil and the deep blue sea. Government enforced the merger and staff on ground level was not prepared and didn't want the merger.*

During the first two years of the incorporation, all members of the incorporated institution carried staff cards indicating the *Department of VUDEC*. Participants were not happy about this arrangement and argued that it contributed to feelings of being alienated and emphasised an *us & them* division. Participants were concerned as to why they were not officially allocated to their respective departments.

Participants raised concerns about the way that the new institution catered for the VUDEC students, as summarised by one academic: *A lot of promises were made but the Unisa system was not in all respect really ready for the VUDEC students. They are very lost in the system, a lot of them got totally lost within and outside of the system. I think they are out of the academic track all together. That is a gut feeling, I cannot quantify.* Although various participants felt that VUDEC students may have got lost in the transition process, the gains of studying at a larger institution with more diverse and better-equipped facilities were acknowledged. Concerns were however raised as to whether the VUDEC students were equipped to utilise these facilities.

The majority of participants felt that the VUDEC programmes had much to offer, but that they did not receive the opportunity within their collective departments or faculties to negotiate a place for these programmes. One academic stated: *We were in our way of thinking, our curriculum processes, far ahead regarding the new South Africa. It is sad to think that all those things were wiped off the table. We could have saved so many things.* Towards the end of the incorporation process and due to national pressure for

further transformation of academic curricula, some departments suddenly showed a renewed interest in the VUDEC programmes and acknowledged the value of these programmes. As mentioned by an academic: *There is now a greater effort in our department to bring further integration between what they did and what we were doing.*

In reflecting on how management steered the incorporation process, various participants agreed that the process could have been dealt with differently. Top-down decisions made by management were not always perceived as practical and clear guidance and structure could have saved time and energy, contributing to employees, programmes, and structures from VUDEC becoming incorporated into Unisa with less resistance and negative consequences.

Towards the end of the four-year incorporation process, employees received new conditions of service and signed contracts to officially become employees of the new Unisa. Although everything seemed to be in place, various participants raised concerns regarding the mismanagement of the VUDEC pension fund. This had an enormous impact on all members from the incorporated institution, though of more concern for employees reaching retirement age. Contrary to concerns during the onset of the incorporation process, participants were relieved that the new conditions of service incorporated the benefits from the incorporated institution.

Participants acknowledged that employees from the other two institutions – Unisa and TSA – were also influenced by the merger and had to deal with a changing culture, both on departmental as well as institutional level. Towards the end of the incorporation process, various participants raised concerns about how, in their view, employees from the incorporator institution were struggling with the changing educational landscape and the changes in the new institution. An academic stated: *Their boat is no longer.*

Questions arise as to whether employees from the incorporated institution, given their history of uncertainty relating to various transformation processes, were not *better equipped* for the continuous changing of the institutional identity and functioning. Participants were of the opinion that they seemed more positive about their positions in relation to threats of transformation, rationalisation, and staff reduction than their colleagues from the incorporator institution, as summarised by an academic participant:

They can't laugh any more, they are always angry. They are the ones who wish to take the packages, who want to resign, they seem more unhappy than us.

After completion of the incorporation process, participants expressed concerns about the already perceived decline of the new institution and wondered, ironically, whether they needed to prepare for another rocky transformational journey. In terms of obstacles currently experienced in delivering a good service, such as problems experienced with registration of students and delay in publishing examination timetables, enhanced by a perceived low morale amongst employees and negative institutional publicity, various participants voiced concerns as to whether *Unisa is where Vista was*. One participant argued: *Time will tell whether the new Unisa will continue to be a major role player in higher education in South Africa.*

DISCUSSION

The longitudinal nature of this study allowed various themes of particular importance to participants to be identified during the different stages of the incorporation process. Themes of importance during the onset of this investigation, such as copying with the physical move into the new working environment; negotiating positions in departments or units; new conditions of service; et cetera, were either addressed during the course of the incorporation or alternative solutions were sought. Two global themes, that of (1) institutional culture and (2) identification with the new institution, seemed of particular significance during all the phases of the incorporation process.

A strong institutional culture, with well-ordered values, beliefs, and assumptions may hinder a merger or incorporation process, while the compatibility of the incorporated and incorporator institutional cultures further influence the ease with which employees accept the process (Pikula, 1999). While acknowledging the decline of the incorporated institution prior to the incorporation, participants held on to the strong notion of a family culture that characterised the institution. In moving from a relatively small institution to the much larger incorporated institution, a strong *us and them* discourse amongst members of the two institutions seemed to prevail. This is, however, not unusual, given that changes with mergers are often resisted by employees from the incorporated institution in fear of the threat to their original institutional culture (Holden, 2001; Lynch & Lind, 2002; Siegel, 2000) which leads to a focus on the

differences as opposed to the similarities between the institutions (Bijlsma-Frankema, 2001; Marks, 1997; Pikula, 1999). Lotz and Donald (2006) further argued that employees in the incorporated institution often become more cohesive as a group and tend to hold more similar perceptions of the incorporation. The traditional boundaries between groups of employees, such as job level, may become less important as the boundaries shift to include the entire incorporated institution (Lotz & Donald, 2006). This was evident in this investigation, especially during the months immediately after the incorporation, as various participants reflected on the strong bond that existed amongst VUDEC employees.

It is, however, not homogeneous institutional cultures that merge and should rather be understood as mixtures of cultural manifestations of different levels and kinds. Cultural configurations in tertiary institutions are multiple, complex, and shifting, and employees are connected to different degrees within the institution, departments, profession, gender, class, ethnic group, and so on (Alvesson, 2002). Since cultures seem to overlap within an institutional setting and rarely manifested in a static and pure form (Alvesson, 2002), it is not surprising that employees varied in how they perceived the incorporator institutional culture on an individual, interpersonal, and institutional level. Of note is the acute awareness of *racial and power relations* in the new institution, a concern raised especially by black participants during the onset of the incorporation process. Lotz and Donald (2006) stated that issues of power typically come to the fore during mergers and hierarchical differences become especially pertinent at such times, while Collins (2005), in investigating the gendered nature of mergers, suggested that issues of class, gender, and race interact during institutional change. In this investigation, awareness of race and racial division in the incorporator institution were reported to be far more evident than at the incorporated institution, and a lack of representation in the composition of the management of the new institution was of particular concern to participants, leading to threats of not being adequately represented in decision-making processes and the formation of the new institutional culture. Of note, however, is the fact that gender relations were not raised as a point of concern during any phase of the incorporation process.

The majority of academic participants experienced a *sense of continuity*, based on the similarities between the incorporated and incorporator departments, allowing them to

identify with the new working environment with more ease. While either phasing out or integrating their academic programmes from the incorporated institution, academics were often allowed sufficient time to become involved with the incorporator department's programmes. Van Dick et al. (2006) strongly supported the notion that continuity in work routines, teams, and communication helps to reduce feelings of job insecurity, which, according to Bartels et al. (2006) lead to a positive identification with the new institution. Of concern in this investigation was that administrative participants, on the other hand, often found themselves in departments and units far removed from what they were used to, or comfortable with, which consequently led to strong feelings of insecurity and uncertainty in the new working environment.

Identifying with the new institution is closely related to how employees deal with the potential loss of personal and institutional identities due to the merger (Buono & Bowditch, 1989) and how they perceive the formation of the new institutional culture (Cornelissen et al., 2007; van Dick et al., 2006). The manner in which management from both the incorporated and incorporator institutions communicated the processes involved in the incorporation and the consequent direction that the institution would take, contributed largely to the extent to which employees were willing and able to identify themselves with the new institution. Communication has been shown as a key factor in mergers and institutional change processes, contributing largely to employees' successful identification with the merged institution and acceptance of the change (Bartels et al., 2006; Jimmieson, Terry, & Callan, 2004; Lotz & Donald, 2006; Smidts, Pruyn, & van Riel, 2001; van Dick et al., 2006). The longitudinal nature of this investigation allowed for the monitoring of how participants perceived *communication from management* during the various stages of the incorporation process. Although participants expressed an overall lack of quality and amount of communication from management, change-related information became more readily accessible from direct managers and within working groups in departments and units.

While management of the new institution was criticised for not providing clear guidance and effective communication, managers or supervisors on departmental level were often acknowledged for communicating frequently with incorporated employees, allowing for information to become more readily available, which led to a smoother integration. In investigating the impact of social support on the health among employees

facing changes at work, cross-sectional studies have indicated that line managers' support has more impact than co-workers' support, since it potentially provides more resources to deal with changes in the work environment (Terry, Callan, & Sartori, 1996). Although participants appreciated the support received by colleagues who also underwent the incorporation process, Terry et al. (1996) warned that such support may increase negative emotions via rumours and speculations, which might, in fact, have been the case in this investigation.

Employees' attitudes and behaviour largely relate to how they perceive the changes associated with the incorporation process (van Dick et al., 2006). Lotz and Donald (2006) argue that major strategic changes generate ambiguity about potential terminations, transfers, and the need to survive in a new and relatively unknown situation. In this investigation, it seemed that *accepting the changes* associated with the incorporation was mainly influenced by the manner in which employees became integrated into respective incorporator departments or units. Initial resistance to change seemed to stem from fears of being able to function in and being accepted in the new working environment. Fairfield et al. (2002) warned that, during mergers, there are likely to be uncertainty regarding procedures and norms as well as lack of guidelines for acting appropriately in the changing context.

Kezar and Eckel (2002) pointed to the fact that two links between *culture* and *change* have been made in higher education literature. The first set of literature suggested that institutions of higher education need to have a culture that encourages change, while the second set of ideas suggested culture or key institutional elements that shape culture, for example vision or mission, are modified as a result of the change process. The outcome of change, therefore, is a modified culture (Kezar & Eckel, 2002).

Employees' reaction to change is also, according to Kavanagh and Ashkanasy (2006), influenced by situational appraisals that will reflect their evaluation regarding how the incorporation will affect their level of well-being. In a climate characterised by job insecurity, lack of communication, the phasing out of academic programmes, and getting use to a new working environment, it is without doubt expected that employees' physical and emotional well-being will be effected (Appelbaum, Gandell, Yortis, Proper, & Jobin, 2000). If one considers the emotional reactions (i.e., anxiety,

depression, etc.) associated with the merger syndrome (Hunsaker & Coombs, 1988), it is not surprising that various participants expressed the need for more direct counselling and debriefing sessions, especially during the onset of the incorporation process.

Although some administrative participants acknowledged the role that HR played in welcoming them in their new departments or units, it was, however, often a once off event and not all incorporated employees were involved. Giessner et al. (2006) suggested that a human resource management team with knowledge of the implications of the specific merger pattern should be appointed during a merger or incorporation to support employees from both the incorporated and incorporator institutions.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As part of a broader investigation into the incorporation of VUDEC into Unisa, the current investigation built on the exploration of employees' preparation during the pre-merger phase (see Fourie, 2008b) as well as the capturing of the VUDEC institutional culture (see Fourie, 2008a). In this part of the investigation, academic and administrative employees from the incorporated VUDEC gained the opportunity to share their experiences of the implementation of the incorporation over a four-year period. Following a social identity approach, identity and identification within and across institutional contexts were, as proposed by Brown (2001), explored on multiple levels of analysis, including individual, group, institutional, and cultural levels.

The longitudinal nature of this investigation allowed the opportunity to explore how various factors were neglected or dealt with during the various phases of the incorporation process. The findings support the assumption that trust in management, effective leadership, communication, sense of continuity, integrating institutional cultures, and acceptance of changes (Burke, 2002; Marks & Mirvis, 1998) play a tremendous role in how employees identify with the new institution. Although it was not easy to leave the familiar tea-drinking culture in the corridors of VUDEC behind, employees progressively established themselves as active participants in the formation of a new institutional culture. Horwitz et al. (2002) suggested that employee participation and integration working teams may give focus and guidance, allocate resources, improve morale, and enhance implementation effectiveness. Although, in the present investigation, management and HR envisaged the launch of an official change

management programme to steer the integration process by involving employees on various levels, it, however, did not realise.

While the majority of universities and technikons in South Africa underwent mergers and incorporations during the past decade, the higher education landscape and more specifically the national landscape of the country did not remain stagnant. Vaara and Tienari (2002) argued that it is difficult to distinguish the effects of a merger or incorporation from the ongoing web of cause-and-effects relationships in institutional life. Although various issues of concern in this investigation were being identified and often very conveniently blamed as consequences of the merger, it would be interesting also to investigate the concurrent transformation in institutions and national transformation, both in terms of mergers and as the natural progression of institutional and national life and identity. It is acknowledged that the current investigation focussed primarily on the experiences of the incorporated employees, and I suggest that, in future studies, employees from the incorporator institution(s) also be involved in investigating the human factor of mergers.

To return to Murphy's (1998) investigation of the similarities in the processes of stepfamily formation and institutional mergers, only time will tell whether the divorce from the old institutions and the re-partnering of the three institutions – VUDEC, Unisa, and TSA – will lead to a successful new *blended family*. Four years later, and with regard to the incorporation of VUDEC into the new institution, it does seem as if the lawn is surviving the love-making elephants.

NOTE

1. In this investigation, an incorporation is defined by adopting Lang's (2002, p. 42) notion of 'transformative acquisition' in which 'one partner absorbs the other but changes substantially as a result'.

ENDNOTE

This manuscript is the third of a series based on my Dlitl et Phil research investigation into the incorporation of VUDEC into the merger between Unisa and TSA under the title: *Mergers in higher education: Towards a survival kit for conserving the self*.

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MANUSCRIPT 4

A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE HUMAN SIDE IN MERGER LITERATURE: SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION 1998 – 2008

Mergers and incorporations are relatively new phenomena in the South African higher education landscape. This manuscript focuses on the human side of these mergers and incorporations and provides a critical review of both national and international merger literature with a specific focus on the impact that the restructuring process in higher education has on the people involved. Reference is made to the unbundling of Vista University and the consequent incorporation of VUDEC into the Unisa–TSA merger. Attention to people’s issues in the transformational process is reviewed with a focus on the management of the change process, communication as a vehicle for change, and defining and integrating institutional culture and institutional identification. Finally, a survival kit for conserving the self in a merger is proposed.

Keywords: higher education; incorporations; institutional culture; institutional identity; merger literature; people’s issues; transformation

Institutions of higher education are not immutable and often have a dynamic life cycle which may, through a process of genesis, eventually lead to independent, self-sustained entities (Pritchard, 1998). They may also fall into decline, remain stagnant, or even change into new entities through mergers, incorporations, or alliances with more powerful institutions. Mergers are amongst the most significant events that an institution may engage in and for some institutions it may mean that they cease to exist, at least in their pre-merger form (Harman & Meek, 2002). Few, if any, mergers are painless. The literature stresses that mergers denote radical change: not only is the

management of the institutions affected, but the 'souls' of the partners are also affected as they have to relate to the process of change (Skodvin, 1999, p. 68). It can take up to ten years for the wounds to heal and for the new institution to operate as a cohesive and well-integrated whole (Harman & Meek, 2002).

RATIONALE FOR MERGERS AND INCORPORATIONS

Why then do mergers and incorporation occur in higher education? The main force behind mergers seems to be some kind of assumed gain. National governments implement mergers in order to achieve a variety of purposes, but mainly for major restructuring to address problems of institutional fragmentation, lack of financial and academic viability, low efficiency and quality (Harman & Harman, 2003), and to increase government control of the overall direction of higher education systems (Harman & Meek, 2002). Skodvin (1999) further argued that educational institutions merge in order to establish a comprehensive academic institution with more effective management and administrative resources and with an improvement in the use of physical facilities.

Mergers and incorporations are relatively new phenomena in the South African higher education landscape. The major restructuring and transformation of the higher education system for the period 2004 and 2005 is guided by the *National Plan for Higher Education* as envisaged in the White Paper 3 and the Act of 1997 (Department of Education, 2002). Provision was made for the merging of 36 institutions of higher education into 21; comprising 11 universities, 6 universities of technology (former technikons), and 4 comprehensive institutions (i.e., institutions offering both university and technikon programmes) (Nkoane, 2006; Sedgwick, 2004). The National Plan further identified the goals and objectives for the reconstruction of the higher education system with a view to increasing access and producing graduates with the skills and competencies necessary for meeting the human resource needs of the country; promoting equity of access and outcomes; and to redress past inequalities through ensuring that student and staff profiles reflect the

demographic composition of South African society (Department of Education 2002; Fourie, 1999; Jansen, 2002a; Reddy, 1998; Wilkinson, 2003).

The restructuring of the South African higher education system, and especially the build-up and rationale for the transformation, received wide attention in the literature. Much has been written about policy formulation (Cassim, 2005; Elliott, 2005; Fataar, 2003; Kissack & Enslin, 2003; Kraak, 2004; McGrath, 2004; Reddy, 2004; Saleem, 2005); legal implications (Leslie, 2003; Malherbe, 2003; Soobrayan, 2003); as well as on issues of quality assurance (Mentz & Mentz, 2006; Sedgwick, 2004; Wilkinson, 2003); evaluation of higher education transformation (Horsthemke, 2004; van der Westhuizen, 2007); academic freedom (Malherbe, 2003); managing change and diversity (Arnolds & Boshoff, 2004; Kilfoil & Groenewald, 2005; Narsee, 2004; Nicolson, 2004; Steyn & van der Walt, 2005; Vinger & Cilliers, 2006); reformulation of institutional curricula (Blunt, 2005; Jansen, 2004; Jordaan, 2004; Kissack & Enslin, 2003; Kizito, 2006; Mfusi, 2004; Narsee, 2004); information systems development (Barnard, 2005; Möller, 2006; Paterson, 2005; van der Merwe & Möller, 2004); and globalisation and internationalisation (Kissack & Enslin, 2003; Le Grange, 2002; Nkopodi, 2002; van der Walt, Bolsmann, Johnson, & Martin, 2003; Waghid, 2001).

This manuscript focuses primarily on the human side of mergers of higher education institutions in South Africa. A critical review is provided of both international and national literature on the impact that the restructuring process in higher education has on employees, with specific reference to the unbundling of Vista University and the consequent incorporation of Vista University Distance Education Campus (VUDEC) into the University of South Africa (Unisa) – Technikon South Africa (TSA) merger. For an outline of the restructuring of institutions of higher education proposed by the Ministry of Education (2003) for the period 2004 and 2005 see Appendix 1.

MERGERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Kotecha and Harman (2001) argued that an awareness of international mergers in higher education may be useful in assisting South African institutions of higher education to conceptualise issues and problems, to develop an understanding of the drivers of mergers, and to identify the models and mechanisms that have been used to implement and assess different approaches to mergers and incorporations. Hall, Symes, and Luescher (2004), however, pointed to the fact that while the South African experience of restructuring is unfolding in the context of reconstruction and development, the international literature is mainly devoted to the experiences of developed countries.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, political authorities in the United Kingdom and Australia initiated mergers to create a two-fold higher education system with the establishment of colleges of advanced education and polytechnics as alternatives to universities. Mergers were also an important measure in the 1970s in the German experiment with the *Gesamthochschulen* as well as in the Swedish reform in higher education (Skodvin, 1999). In the late 1970s, Australia, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom used mergers to rationalise and make teacher training education more effective. In the USA, mergers have been commonly used in private and public higher education institutions from 1960 onwards (Skodvin, 1999). The mid 1980s until the 1990s saw the most extensive use of mergers in order to create changes in higher education systems internationally. During this period the Dutch, Norwegian, and Flemish authorities used mergers to re-organise their higher education system (Skodvin, 1999). Mergers in Australian higher education during the 1980s and onwards were often characterised by multi-institutional mergers involving cultural challenges to integrate communities from the merging of campuses that were historically and symbolically diverse (Harman, G., 2000; Harman, K., 2002; Hatton, 2002). A particular cultural challenge for higher education managers was to steer the merging of divergent campus cultures into coherent educational communities that display high levels of integration and loyalty to the new institution (Harman & Harman, 2003).

Rowley (1997) investigated thirty mergers in higher education in the United Kingdom between 1987 and 1994 and found that these mergers typically took place between two institutions of quite unequal size. The benefits actually gained from these mergers were often greater than anticipated and in some cases led to unexpected developments of strategic significance for the merger partners. Rowley (1997) further established that the most significant benefit of mergers for the future of the larger institution was the enhancement of academic portfolios. The delivery of academic quality at the smaller institution was often stated as the single most unexpected bonus of the merger. In a few cases, however, the poor quality of programmes and staff inherited in the smaller institution has been cited as a problem area. Despite the fact that organisational culture mix created problems in these merger processes, it was felt that drawing the different cultures together resulted in a dynamic mix of staff of different educational philosophies and backgrounds. After reviewing mergers in the United Kingdom between 1987 and 1996, Fielden and Markham (1997) identified possible obstacles in the merger of higher education institutions, which include the conflict between institutional cultures and between different educational philosophies and priorities. The relocation of staff and students further lead to the disruption of the academic programme while the poor quality of the academic programme and staff of the (smaller) incorporated institution may be seen as an obstacle in the merger process.

Unanticipated synergies resulted from the merger of various types and levels of staff in the mergers of higher education in the United Kingdom when new enhanced teaching portfolios gave birth to new opportunities for staff, but inevitably required heavy investment in staff development and training (Rowley, 1997). The process of merging itself could result in greater transparency in the management of higher education due to the redesign or restructuring of the governance undertaken as a central part of the merger (Rowley, 1997). Although the restructuring of higher education in the United Kingdom centred mainly on non-university institutions, a number of universities have initiated merger discussions (Harman & Harman, 2003). During 2002 and 2003, Cartwright, Tytherleigh, and Robertson (2007) examined the

experiences of employees involved in the merger of two universities in the United Kingdom from a stress and well-being perspective. Contradictory to findings from other studies, these authors found that employees from both institutions were relatively healthy in terms of sources and effects of stress during the pre-merger phase. Prior to the merger, the institutions operated in close physical proximity and employees at both institutions had a history of collaboration. The merger was further characterised by less secrecy and more public communication. Job security was, however, a significant and continuing source of stress (Cartwright et al., 2007).

The main attempt to restructure higher education institutions in Canada was the integration of teacher colleges into university faculties of education as well as the integration of independent specialist institutions into universities. Curri (2002) investigated the outcome of restructuring in New South Wales, Australia in order to assist policy makers in Nova Scotia, Canada in their restructuring of higher education. It was argued that open communication with staff is critical to reduce fears and that the effect of the merger should be explained fully to all staff members, while the age of the institution and its culture be considered a critical factor in merger discussions.

Since the early 1990s, Chinese higher education experienced around 300 cases of mergers, involving over 700 public colleges or universities, in an attempt to enhance research and teaching performance and to promote efficiency, effectiveness, and economy in higher education (Mok, 2005). Cai (2006) found the cultural dimension crucial in the integration process of academic staff after the amalgamation of three Chinese universities. Leadership, institutional objectives, regulations, cultural differences, and geographical division further affected the integration process (Cai, 2006). In the mid 1990s, after the merger of 98 vocationally oriented colleges resulted in 26 colleges in Norway (Kyvik, 2002), Norgård and Skodvin (2002) also investigated how geographical distance as well as cultural differences between campuses influenced the degree of attainment of academic and administrative goals. The authors argued that both network theory and a cultural approach are necessary to

understand the merger process as well as the outcomes, and in order to achieve increased integration and co-operation, the infrastructural, social, and institutional networks need to function in a satisfactory way. Employees, however, seem to maintain already existing collaborative relationships and new ones are difficult to establish, leading to the conclusion that basic professional values and beliefs shared by groups of academics, as well as identity and loyalty, are often more connected to the discipline than to the institution.

The restructuring of teacher colleges and polytechnics into universities in New Zealand followed a similar course as in Canada, while a number of Eastern European and Asian systems of higher education (i.e., in Hungary and Vietnam) have addressed problems of fragmentation of highly specialised institutions under different ministries by building larger and more comprehensive institutions (Harman & Harman, 2003; Kotecha & Harman, 2001).

Different forms of collaboration are therefore commonly found in higher education systems around the world. These collaborations very seldom include the consolidation of two universities of equal size. The majority of these collaborations involve the incorporation of non-university structures (such as colleges and politechnics) into universities or the amalgamation of single purpose institutions into larger, comprehensive institutions. Kotecha and Harman (2001) argued that no single solution suits all higher education systems and it is therefore essential to consider the national context as well as the options available in deciding on the structure and form of collaboration. International mergers of higher education institutions have shown that mergers could achieve successful larger, comprehensive institutions. These comprehensives may achieve a competitive advantage in terms of size and shape, advantages for staff and students in terms of programme offerings, infrastructure, services and qualifications, as well as the potential for long term economic advantages (Kotecha & Harman, 2001).

MERGERS AND INCORPORATIONS IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION PRIOR TO 2004

Although the implementation of the majority of mergers and incorporation of tertiary institutions was scheduled for 2004 and 2005 (Ministry of Education, 2003), a number of specialist institutions (i.e., teacher training colleges, technickons) had merged with or been incorporated into other institutions prior to 2004. In 2000, Hay and Fourie (2002) investigated the perceptions of staff members at three Colleges of Education in the Free State which had been identified for possible merging with either a university or a different type of further education institution. The authors argued that, at that stage, '[f]ew (if any) studies has been undertaken to investigate the psychological experiences of academic staff in institutions which either have been merged or who are in the process of merging' (p. 120). The majority of respondents in their investigation agreed that mergers should be supported with the assumption that the merging institutions complement each other. Feelings of insecurity were however reported by the majority of respondents, and Hay and Fourie (2002) recommended that these feelings of insecurity needed to be addressed in the form of staff development programmes. A further finding reflects respondents' overwhelming feeling that mergers should be initiated by the relevant institutions and not forced by government. This is supported by Jansen (2002b) as well as the South African Vice Chancellors Association (SAUVCA) (cited in Kotecha & Harman, 2001). The latter argues that voluntary mergers have a greater opportunity of success than those imposed on the institutions.

Power relations and struggles cloud merger processes

In drawing on five merger cases in South African higher education between 2000 and 20002, Jansen (2003) stated that these proposed mergers proceeded despite intense political resistance from various constituencies and that the planned mergers unfolded in completely different ways. These five case studies of mergers and incorporations include the incorporation of the South African College of Teacher Education (SACTE) into the University of South Africa (Unisa); the Johannesburg College of Education (JCE) into the university of the Witwatersrand (Wits); Giyani College of

Education (GCE) into the University of Venda for Science and Technology (UNIVEN); the merger of the ML Sultan (MLS) Technikon and Technikon Natal (TN) to form the Durban Institute of Technology (DIT); and the Faculty of Veterinary Science (FOVS) of the Medical University of South Africa (MEDUNSA) and the University of Pretoria (UP).

In January 2001, the incorporation of the South African College of Teacher Education (SACTE) into Unisa had a profound effect on its employees. A significant number of employees at SACTE had already experienced previous incorporations and mergers and this incorporation 'was for many the veritable straw that broke the camel's back' (Soobrayan, 2002, p. 43). The majority of employees reported feelings of uncertainty, especially with reference to the future. A further problem reported by employees after the allocation of new positions was that academic staff found themselves in positions they were not suitable for. Some employees did, however, attempt to adjust to the new situation and to use the opportunity to empower themselves (Soobrayan, 2002). Although some of the college's material and courses were accepted and used at Unisa, much valuable material and many skilled staff were lost during the merger (Mfusi, 2004).

When the Johannesburg College of Education (JCE) was incorporated into the University of Witwatersrand (Wits) in January 2001, it was assumed that the incorporation would be one of the 'easier combinations to implement', given its history of partnership over more than eighty years (Sehoole, 2002, p. 54). This was however not the case and the integration process was contested, with several incidents threatening the outcome. Not only was a new legal entity established, but JCE continued to exist on its original campus with relative independence from the School of Education at Wits. It was renamed The College of Education at Wits and continued to enjoy protected powers and privileges that kept its academic programmes intact (Sehoole, 2002). The support staff at JCE remained employees of the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) and were anxious about redeployment uncertainties. They reported feelings of being unwanted by both JCE and Wits while

the support staff at Wits further reported unhappiness regarding the manner in which the incorporation was communicated. Academic staff members at Wits were mainly concerned about the relocation of departments, leading Sehoole (2002) to argue that the effect of the incorporation on the academic staff members of JCE should be seen 'within the context of a sense of solidarity, support and unity that prevailed within the College community' (p. 78). In the light of possible job losses, academic staff worked together with the Council to reach the best possible solutions. The outcome of this process was that more than ninety percent of the academic staff was employed by Wits. As is the case in the previously mentioned incorporation of SACTE into UNISA, many of the JCE staff had already been exposed to previous restructuring processes which impacted on their attitudes towards the incorporation (Sehoole, 2002).

The Giyani College of Education (GCE) was incorporated into the University of Venda for Science and Technology (UNIVEN) in December 2000. In 2001 at the commencement of the academic year, no details were available as to the position of staff, students or programmes at GCE. Although an agreement was reached as to the future of the staff at GCE, poor communication between stakeholders delayed the secondment and redeployment processes. The incorporation was 'a painful and difficult process for GCE staff' (Bandi, 2002, p. 99) while management on the other hand provided a positive impression of the successful outcome of the incorporation. The administrative and support staff at GCE reported inadequate consultation and uncertainty about the future (Bandi, 2002).

The merger of the faculties of Veterinary Sciences of the Medical University of South Africa (MEDUNSA) and of the University of Pretoria (UP) led to a new faculty that started operations in July 1999. During the pre-merger phase, both institutions established committees to address staff issues, including job security, salaries, retention of senior posts, and other matters (Lethoko, 2002). The outcome of this process was that all staff members from both institutions, except those who took retirement packages, remained in their positions and with the same benefits they held

at the original institution. Staff experiences of the merger varied based on race and level of appointment. Academic staff from both institutions welcomed the merger and felt that integration of resources and expertise promotes training and research (Lethoko, 2002). However the black lecturers from MEDUNSA did not see the changes as completely positive and black lecturers from both institutions expressed concerns that, although they were equal to their white colleagues, they felt ‘subtle pressure from both white colleagues and students that they might not be “good enough”’ (Lethoko, 2002, p. 123). White lecturers at UP reported concerns that the merger may lead to a decline in the standards of veterinary science training in South Africa whereas black technical and support staff from both institutions reported concerns regarding the use of mainly Afrikaans as a medium of communication as well as unclear job descriptions. The white technical staff did not share the same anxiety over their jobs and believed ‘that those who remained with the Faculty would be the ones who deserve to continue their work’ (Lethoko, 2002, p. 125).

In April 2002, the merger of Technikon Natal (TN) and the M. L. Sultan Technikon (MLST) to form the Durban Institute of Technology in KwaZulu Natal saw the first (and only) voluntary merger of public higher education institutions (Chalufu, 2002, Humphrey, 2003). The merger of these two institutions did however not escape concerns regarding anxiety and uncertainty amongst employees. Uncertainties about employment varied in relation to race, level of appointment, as well as at institutional level. The staff members from TN were generally more positive about the merger and anticipated greater benefits in terms of remuneration. The staff from MLST expressed concerns about the overall financial status and viability of the new technikon (Chalufu, 2002), while the implementation phase of the merger further saw serious operational problems involving student issues (Humphrey, 2003). Muller (2006) investigated the experiences of staff during the merger of the two institutional libraries and found that managing the change process, identifying a new institutional culture, and communication was of particular concern, leading to tension amongst employees. Of particular concern was that management ‘don’t have ears at the ground’ (p. 206) and are not visible, leading to a strong grapevine at work, while lack

of communication from staff to management further hindered the implementation of the integration process.

Government's announcement of the five merger cases reported above created deep concern among all levels of staff and the impact of the mergers has been devastating for the emotional and professional lives of many staff, at all levels (Jansen, 2003). During the various stages of the merger processes, widespread concerns about job losses, uncertainty about personal careers, anxiety about institutional futures, fears about the lost of autonomy on the part of the weaker partner, perceptions about white staff being advantaged over black staff, or black staff being 'affirmed' over white staff, and a general loss of morale remained evident (Jansen, 2003). Further, the issues of power relations and power struggles clouded the merger processes, especially with regard to curriculum issues (Mfusi, 2004).

A certain degree of distress unavoidable in institutional mergers

Reddy (2007) investigated employee perceptions of the merger between two South African regional technikons, and found differences between categories of staff (academic, administrative, and technical staff) with regard to employee issues of participation, motivation, and job satisfaction. A further significant difference between the categories of staff related to the perceived extent of the effect of the merger on them. A range of problems relating to the merger process were identified which include poor communication, top-down management style, no participative decision-making, lack of extrinsic motivation, decreased job satisfaction, and a lack of institutional loyalty. The majority of participants, however, supported the merger objectives and remained intrinsically motivated and committed to academia and students (Reddy, 2007).

When the Pretoria Teacher's Training College became incorporated into the Faculty of Education at the UP in January 2001, van der Westhuizen (2004) investigated the transformational change process and found that the reactions and perceptions of employees were of particular interest, especially since some staff who had worked at

black colleges in Laudium and Soshanguwe (Becker et al., 2004) had previously experienced similar processes of disruption and relocation. Issues such as loss of confidence and self-worth, a lack of coping mechanisms, and the general mismanagement of the process were noted as adding to unnecessary trauma and anxiety among employees (van der Wetshuizen, 2004). Becker et al. (2004) also found the emotional impact of the incorporation on staff members to be intense, leading to considerable trauma. The authors acknowledged that a certain degree of distress is unavoidable in institutional mergers, however, they argued that lack of attention to the management of human resources, emotions, and aspirations could prolong the transformation of the new institution. During the incorporation, Maree and Eiselen (2004) established the emotional intelligence profiles of academics in the merger setting which provided evidence of how such a drastic life-changing event may hamper the actualisation of academics' intellectual potential. Their research accentuated the importance of timeous and continued assessment of the ongoing functioning and well-being of employees involved in a merger, and it further underlines the need for tailor-made training programmes that may help improve the emotional skills and functioning of such employees (Maree & Eiselen, 2004).

In 2002, after the completion of the incorporation of the colleges of education into other institutions of higher education, Wyngaard and Kapp (2004) reflected on the human side of these transitional processes, with specific reference to the colleges in the Western Cape. Although positive outcomes such as cost-effectiveness and the improvement of programme qualities were reported, negative influences seemed to be predominant. The latter include issues such as the loss of jobs, self-esteem, and confidence, as well as an increase in depression and cynical attitudes. During the incorporation of the Potchefstroom Teacher College (POC) into the Faculty of Education at the, then, Potchefstroom University in January 2001, Steyn and van der Walt (2005) argued that, although there were signs of unhappiness, anxiety, uncertainty, misunderstandings, and resistance, specifically resistance against change in order to protect own positions, the integration of employees from POC went fairly well. Steyn and van der Walt (2005) proceeded to argue that an exceptionally high

amount of time and energy went into the management of human aspects to ensure a smooth transitional process. Nieuwenhuis and Mokoena (2005) investigated the incorporation of a teacher training college into the University of the North and found that effective management of the process did not occur. By not involving staff members in the process, they became disillusioned about their power and authority, which led to the college being turned into an unmanageable institution typified by resistance and a total lack of commitment by staff.

By early 2004, when the 152 technical/vocational colleges in the country were reduced to 50 further education and training colleges, the management and councils were in place in all the new merged colleges, and staff establishments and unified budgets were largely established (McGrath, 2004). Bisschoff and Nkoe (2005) investigated the perceptions of stakeholders – educators, principals, and council members – in three provinces during the merging of these institutions and identified factors that impacted on the effectiveness of the declaration and merging processes which include communication breakdown, mutual acceptance as equals, power problems, a shift from comfort zones, and stakeholders competing for leadership positions. McGrath (2004) argued that, at that stage, there still remained a major challenge to build the new colleges with serious problems around perceptions that some campuses are being advantaged over others. According to Badroodien and McGrath (2003) these perceptions often took on a racial dimension. Elliott (2005) stated that while mergers attempt racial diversity it can also accentuate racial divisions. As in almost all of the case studies discussed above, Wyngaard and Kapp (2004) concluded by presenting an overview of the lessons learnt and the factors to be taken into consideration for the mergers planned for the period 2004 and 2005, and beyond.

RESTRUCTURING OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION LANDSCAPE: 2004 – 2005

The real cost of mergers in terms of the impact on the health, welfare and commitment of staff are incalculable. In the absence of honest communication, rumours flourish – often with negative consequences for those who plan and implement merger decisions. (Jansen, 2002a, p. 177)

While the first round of the restructuring process (prior to 2004) occurred almost unnoticed, the second round involving the simultaneous implementation of mergers and incorporations of various technikons and universities on a national level, was much more drastic and daunting (Tayobeka & Schoeman, 2007). Due to the socio-political history of the country, higher education institutions, at the time, were highly politicised, leading to significant resistance to what was perceived as the government's interference in higher education. The merger process therefore, by its very nature, got off to a very emotive start (Tayobeka & Schoeman, 2007), while transformation or change of any sort inevitably engenders insecurity in institutional staff members (Ulliyatt, 2003).

Critical attitudes towards management

Viljoen and Rothman (2002) stated that restructuring in higher education causes uncertainty, which often contributes to employees being critical towards the management of the affected institutions. During the early stages of a merger among three South African institutions of higher education, Arnolds and Boshoff (2004) found that academic and administrative employees exhibited low levels of commitment (especially to top management) and low levels of satisfaction with monetary remuneration, fringe benefits, and career factors. The results, however, showed high levels of satisfaction with growth factors – opportunities for training and development – and relations with peers, while, in terms of institutional commitment,

respondents showed high performance intentions and low levels of intentions to resign (Arnolds & Boshoff, 2004).

In investigating attitudes of senior management during the pre-merger between the University of the North, MEDUNSA, and the University of Venda (of which the latter was excluded from the proposed merger at a later stage), Menon (2003) established that the merger proposal produced institutional anxiety and trepidation. An over-riding concern expressed by employees was a lack of information on how the merger would take place and what steps the Department of Education would take to ensure that the institutions would receive adequate support. Participants further indicated that it was not apparent that the proposed mergers could be linked to the goals and objectives as set out in the policy documents of the Department of Education (Menon, 2003). The merger between the three technikons – Technikon Northern Gauteng, Technikon North West, and Technikon Pretoria – to form the Tswane University of Technology (TUT) saw the challenge of merging former white and black institutions. Tayobeka and Schoeman (2007) argued that the relative strength and size of the various institutions brought about perceptions of dominance and claims of takeovers that impacted negatively on a smooth implementation.

The postponement by the Minister of Education of the merger between the Border Technikon, Eastern Cape Technikon, and the University of Transkei to form the comprehensive Walter Sisulu University in the Easter Cape Province contributed to uncertainty and low morale among staff (Jack, 2007). Although the search for a new identity and the fostering of a new institutional culture was hampered by the difficulty of translating its new vision and mission into programme design and development, collective leadership eventually smoothed the process and led to a gradual nurturing of the new identity (Jack, 2007).

THE UNBUNDLING OF VISTA UNIVERSITY

In January 2001, after 21 years of existence, the various campuses of Vista University became incorporated into appropriate institutions within each region (Ministry of

Education, 2003). This section provides an overview of available literature on the incorporation of campuses, a faculty, and a department of Vista University with specific attention to the incorporation of VUDEC into the Unisa–TSA merger.

Incorporation at macro level

When the Soweto and East Rand campuses of Vista University became incorporated into the Rand Afrikaans University (RAU) prior to the merger with the Technikon Witwatersrand to form the new University of Johannesburg (UJ), Rossouw (2004) pointed to the fact that the merger had ushered in an identity crisis. RAU accepted the incorporation of the two historically black campuses of Vista University, but opposed the merger with the technikon, arguing that the merger with a polytechnic could weaken the university's academic programmes. Challenges facing the new institution included the identity and culture of the institution (Bosch, 2006), the need for equality among the campuses despite vast gaps in resources, decisions relating the programmes that will be offered, assurances to students that the quality will remain intact (Rossouw, 2004), the restructuring of student organisations (Plaatjie, 2006), effective dissemination of information to the institution's alumni (Barnard, 2005), and the right to academic freedom and university autonomy (Malherbe, 2003). Communication, the importance of leadership and management before and during the merger, the need for emotional support from management, as well as specific skills and training needed by management to lead employees during the various stages of the UJ merger was highlighted by Bosch (2006). While the mainly black students from the two Vista campuses gained access to more advanced resources, they were sensitive about being considered inferior. On the other hand, students – both black and white – from the historically white RAU were concerned about how merging with debt-ridden institutions would affect the quality of their education (Rossouw, 2004). Lecturers were facing their own set of concerns since those at the more prestigious university feared that their reputation and research may suffer once they are forced to teach alongside polytechnic lecturers while those at the less prestigious institutions were concerned that they may be among the first to be laid off (Rossouw, 2004).

After three years of the incorporation of the Sebokeng Campus of Vista into the merger between Potchefstroom University and the University of the North West, Eloff (2007) reported that the incorporation went exceptionally well, with all staff being relocated to the Vaal Triangle Campus by the beginning of 2005. The last pipeline students had almost completed their programmes. Differences along racial lines were noted in the investigation of major quality assurance issues during the merger between the former, mainly white Potchefstroom University and the mainly black University of the North West (no reference was, however, made of the incorporation of the Sebokeng Campus of Vista University) to form the multi-campus North West University (Mentz & Mentz, 2006). Deep-seated differences between the approaches of managers from the two institutions were noted, leading Mentz and Mentz (2006) to argue that, in developing a new institutional culture, 'a number of imponderables will emerge' (p. 118), which also need to be taken into account in the process of quality assurance. Eloff (2007) stated that major hurdles were expected in the merger process, which include amongst others, resistance to change, low levels of trust, and the management model. These were managed through regular communication at all levels, and while it was agreed to limit uncertainties – especially with governance and management structures – issues were not rushed but rather allowed to grow organically.

Pressing issues during the incorporation of the Port Elizabeth Campus of Vista University into the merger between the University of Port Elizabeth and the Port Elizabeth Technikon, to form the comprehensive Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) included harmonisation of salaries and the staff equity profile, the latter of particular concern at senior management level and within the academic sector (Nel & Strumpf, 2007). Uncertainties caused by the merger process led to the loss of staff members – including equity candidates – which remained a major factor hindering the advancement of employment equity (Nel & Strumpf, 2007). Despite the low student numbers and proportionally fewer black academic staff at the Vista Campus, the incorporation has resulted in the NMMU generally being seen as a new

institution which operates, and relates to, a vastly different community than the historically white founding institutions individually (Nel & Strumpf, 2007).

Incorporation at micro level: The case of a faculty and a department

Bauer and Wilkinson (2005) investigated the perceptions of members of a specific faculty of the Bloemfontein campus of Vista University before and after the incorporation into the University of the Free State. Fear with regard to the loss of identity and power or status, mistrust in the management structures of both institutions, and inadequate communication regarding the incorporation by leadership were some of the key issues identified in the pre-merger phase of the incorporation. Few signs were, however, found of the ‘them and us’ feeling or the ‘loser’ syndrome (p. 203). The post-incorporation survey investigated how faculty members experienced the first months of the incorporation and whether their expectations – positive and negative – had been met. Participants were generally satisfied with the positive manner in which they had been received by their respective departments. The negative experiences and feelings, however, outnumbered the positive ones and lack of sensitivity to cultural diversity; insufficient communication, negative attitudes on the part of the receiving institution, inadequate support systems, and academic disparities were raised. Manifestations of alarming ‘them and us’ feelings and ‘loser’ syndrome (p. 209) were more evident during the post- incorporation survey, and should, according to Bauer and Wilkinson (2005), be opposed in a more pro-active way.

Prior to the unbundling of Vista University and the incorporation of the eight campuses into different universities, Bakker (2007) embarked on a study allowing staff and students from the Department of Psychology to preserve and document the local knowledge developed in the department. Participants gained the opportunity to reflect on issues regarding power/knowledge relations, identity, and voice within the institutional and political context of the incorporation process. Although not part of the original purpose of the study, most participants chose to reflect on their experiences of the incorporation process, which was at the time of the investigation,

well under way. All participants spoke about experiences of marginalisation, alienation, and voicelessness, with the exception of one participant, who felt welcomed at the receiving institution. Bakker (2007) further reported that some employees had found the experience so unpleasant that they had decided to leave the university, while most participants expressed concern about the future of students who, previously, would have entered university education through Vista University.

The Unisa–TSA merger with the incorporation of VUDEC: Three to one, the countdown has begun...

On 1 January 2004, the new comprehensive Unisa came into being as a result of the merger between Unisa and TSA with the incorporation of VUDEC into the new institution on 2 January 2004. Only after the official merger date, did the billboard slogans on campus announced: ‘three to one, the countdown has begun to comprehensive distance education for the nation’. The delay in implementing the merger and the original failed gazetting of the merger by the Minister offset synergies and increased anxiety by protracted negotiations (Humphrey, 2003). Humphrey (2003) also warned that it would be a challenge to break links with the old institutions on both individual staff member and institutional level, while bringing down the borders between university and technikon posed a further challenge.

In considering the consequences of the TSA, VUDEC, and Unisa merger, Singh and de Ridder (2005) argued that the new comprehensive university inherited a multitude of opportunities, though the greatest challenge was the management of these opportunities in such a manner that *fear of the unknown* (p. 1) be reduced in order to enhance positive attitudes. Mothata (2007) stated that managing the people side was one of the key challenges in the Unisa merger process since the psychological impact should not be underestimated. Employees became confronted with change or a shift in power, the introduction of new rules and regulations, new evaluation and promotion criteria, new co-workers, changes in benefits, loss of identity, and so on. Psychologically, these challenges can lead to anxiety, depression, and loss of self-

confidence, while physiologically it could lead to high blood pressure, headache, and an increase in sick leave (Mothata, 2007)

On the eve of the incorporation of VUDEC into the Unisa–TSA merger, members from governance, academics, administrative staff, and students gained opportunities to embrace their institutional culture and to reflect on the gains and losses as a result of the incorporation (Fourie, 2008a, 2008b; van der Merwe, 2007). In the apparent absence of clear direction and open communication prior to the incorporation, it was not surprising that employees, and management in particular, resisted the incorporation process. Management even went so far as to prohibit any contact – formal or informal – between individuals and departments from VUDEC with their counterparts at either Unisa or TSA, leaving employees in the dark as to how they would be integrated into the new institution. It was therefore not surprising that employees were holding on to the familiar and mostly feared the unknown immediate and long-term future (Fourie, 2008b). Significant gains for VUDEC students and staff during the incorporation into the new Unisa resided in career development possibilities, higher status, broader programme offerings, and advanced resources (van der Merwe, 2007). As in the findings of Bakker (2007), van der Merwe (2007) argued that the obliteration of the VUDEC culture was accompanied by the disappearance of that segment of VUDEC students who were under-prepared for higher education and further recommended that VUDEC’s sensitised service to these students should be accommodated within the merger.

As part of the longitudinal investigation of the incorporation of VUDEC into the new Unisa, I captured the experiences of various academic and administrative employees from VUDEC during the implementation phase from 2004 until 2008 (see Fourie, 2008c). Institutional culture, identity, and identification with the new institution were explored on individual, group, and institutional levels. The findings support the assumption that trust in management, effective leadership, communication, sense of continuity, integrating institutional cultures, and acceptance of changes play a

tremendous role in how employees identify with the new institution (Burke, 2002; Marks & Mirvis, 1998).

A change management approach

It was only after the official merger took place that the focus expanded from the macro to the micro level and the majority of departments at the new Unisa started to become more intensively involved in the merger process (Kilfoil & Groenewald, 2005). The School of Computing at Unisa adopted an overall management approach based on the principles of open communication and dialogue during the incorporation of the Programme Group Institute of Technology of TSA (Singh & de Ridder, 2005). Change management became the key focus in the merger between the Bureau for Learning Development of Unisa and the Centre of Courseware Design and Development of TSA. Guided by generic change management principles, communication, capacity building, and formal training were perceived as key components in the integration process. Regarding the impact on employees, priority was given to taking care of people, reducing anxiety, and providing choices where possible in order to create a new reality (Kilfoil & Groenewald, 2005).

The focus was also on a change management approach in the integration of the Learner Management Systems of Unisa and TSA in order to develop a system that would closely fit the specific needs of the new institution (van der Merwe & Möller, 2004), without losing the functionality that staff and students enjoyed prior to the merger (Möller, 2006). Möller (2006) noted that staff from the former TSA felt that the merger ignored their needs, while staff from the former Unisa were hesitant to understand why they needed to adopt a new system. Although some academic staff from both institutions seemed to be positive about the implementation of new on-line learning, the total change due to the merger was too overwhelming, leading to most employees becoming inwardly focussed, and making it difficult to gain their trust and cooperation. Based on these findings, Möller (2006) argued for more support on macro level for successful changes in the way the institution approaches teaching.

ATTENTION TO PEOPLE ISSUES: IS IT ACHIEVED?

Most reports and investigations referred to in this manuscript support the notion that while *people issues* is of utmost importance in the restructuring of institutional life, it is often not attended to during the various phases of the merger processes. The often devastating effects of the transformation process on both management and employees echo the findings of mergers and incorporations of international institutions of higher education (see Cai, 2006; Curri, 2002; Fielden & Markham, 1997; Harman, G., 2000; Harman, K., 2002; Harman & Harman, 2003; Hatton, 2002; Norgård & Skodvin, 2002; Rowley, 1997) as well as mergers and acquisitions in the corporate world (see Allen & Sharar, 2000; Kavanagh & Ashkanasy, 2006; Morán & Panasian, 2005; Seo & Hill, 2005).

The dilemma of managing the change process

The uniqueness of the South African restructuring of higher education lies in the fact that it is driven by a political agenda of transformation, redress, and equality in an attempt to break the apartheid mould of higher education (Hall et al., 2004). Although the Department of Education (2002) provided general guidelines for the restructuring process, finding relevant ways to deal with the unique negotiation process to integrate and restructure programmes and resources posed a challenge to each newly formed institution, and more specifically to its management. While the focus is often on attending to systems and processes, it is the 'soft' intangible issues relating to employees that demand the attention and planning of managers if the institutional transformation is to be truly successful (Muller, 2006). It is therefore not surprising that much of the attention in literature reporting on the restructuring of higher education in South Africa focuses on the macro level and the role of management in the change process (see Bauer & Wilkinson, 2005; Bosch, 2006; Jack, 2007; Kilfoil & Groenewald, 2005; Menon, 2003; Mentz & Mentz, 2006; Mothata, 2007; Nel & Strumpf, 2007; Reddy, 2007; Steyn & van der Walt, 2005; van der Merwe & Möller, 2004; Viljoen & Rothman, 2002).

Managers of education institutions find themselves in an unenviable situation in terms of which they need to implement policies to bring about change and to ensure redress and transformation (Nieuwenhuis & Mokoena, 2005), while at the same time being criticised for not attending to the needs of employees. This was especially evident in my investigation of the experiences of VUDEC employees during the incorporation of VUDEC in the merger between Unisa and TSA (see Fourie 2008a, 2008b, 2008c). Although the pre-merger phase and the early days of the merger transitional phase were characterised by the establishment of various change management bodies and processes, very little was done to communicate these processes to employees, resulting in the latter being left in the dark.

Communication: Vehicle to steer the change process

Although some literature reported regular and successful attention to communication during the merger process (Eloff, 2007; Kilfoil & Groenewald, 2005; van der Merwe & Möller, 2004) the majority of studies, emphasised a lack of clear guidance and communication from management regarding the direction of the change process (Bandi, 2002; Bauer & Wilkinson, 2005; Bisschoff & Nkoe, 2005; Bosch, 2006; Muller, 2006; Reddy, 2007; Schoole, 2002). A desire for more open communication from management as a key theme emerged from my own investigation into the experiences of VUDEC employees during the various stages of the incorporation into the new Unisa (see Fourie 2008a, 2008c). This was expected, as communication has been shown to be a key factor in mergers and institutional change processes, contributing substantially to employees' successful identification with the merged institution and acceptance of the change (Bartels, Douwes, de Jong, & Pruyn, 2006; Burke, 2002; Jimmieson, Terry, & Callan, 2004; Lotz & Donald, 2006; Smidts, Pruyn, & van Riel, 2001; van Dick, Ullrich, & Tissington, 2006). A lack of communication from management often leads to heightened self-interest that results in employees becoming more focussed on themselves, their income, and their careers (Marks, 1999). If institutional communication is not addressed properly during the transformation process it will most likely lead to reduction in productivity and an

increase in employee absenteeism or resignation (Appelbaum, Gandell, Yortis, Proper, & Jobin, 2000).

Institutional culture: Marriage between us and them

Hall et al. (2004) stated that the most compelling reason provided for the continued institutional collaboration and the pursuit of the merger strategy in the National Plan is the goal of building new institutional identities and cultures. Harman (2002), however, argued that it is not possible or desirable in any academic community to attempt to integrate institutional cultures into a 'happy family' agreement (p. 110) and in building morale, new loyalties, and a sense of community, leaders need to acknowledge and appreciate the inherent and subtle differences of contested cultures.

VUDEC employees held on to a strong notion of a family culture that characterised the incorporated institution and in moving from a relatively small institution to the much larger incorporated institution, a strong *us and them* attitude seemed to prevail amongst members of the two institutions (Fourie, 2008c). Integrating institutional cultures to form a new institutional culture is of concern in both international mergers in higher education (Cai, 2006; Curri, 2002, Fieldan & Markha, 1997; Harman & Harman, 2003; Kotecha & Harman, 2001; Rowley, 1997) as well as in the restructuring of the South African higher education landscape (Bosch, 2006; Jack, 2007; Mentz & Mentz, 2006; Muller, 2006; van der Merwe, 2007). Key challenges facing the integration of institutional cultures in higher education include, amongst others, the socially differentiated racial history and tradition of these institutions (Bakker, 2007; Harman & Harman, 2003) and the ill-defined status and power of incorporated institutions in the restructuring process (Bakker, 2007; Bauer & Wilkinson, 2005; Bisschoff & Nkoe, 2005; Mfusi, 2004; Nieuwenhuis & Mokoena, 2005; van der Merwe, 2007). In the integration of employees from academic institutions, cultural integration seems to be the most critical issue and may take the longest time (Cai, 2006; Harman, 2002; Norgård & Skodvin, 2002).

Institutional identity: Redefining the self

While institutional culture reflects the norms and patterns of behaviour that have evolved over time, institutional identity captures the relationship between employees and the institution (Zaheer, Schomaker, & Genc, 2003) and is defined as employees' perceived oneness with the institution (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). VUDEC employees varied in their experiences of establishing and maintaining positions in the new Unisa. This was largely determined by whether they experienced a sense of continuity and familiarity on micro level, allowing identification with the new working environment with more ease (Fourie, 2008c). Zaheer et al. (2003) found that, in various cases, employees expected that the institutional culture – how things are done around here – are less of a problem to employees, since they expect that things would change. On the other hand, issues of institutional identity – who would lead the change – appeared to be particularly salient to employees and to pose a bigger challenge, especially in situations where employees identified strongly with their former institutions (Zaheer et al., 2003).

Key challenges in negotiating and defining institutional identities for the newly formed institutions of higher education in South Africa reside in the incorporation of colleges into universities (Bandi, 2002; Jansen, 2002a; 2002b; Mfusi, 2004; Nieuwenhuis & Mokoena, 2005; Schoole, 2002; Soobrayan, 2003; Steyn & van der Walt, 2005; van der Westhuizen, 2004); sub-divisions of universities into larger universities (Bakker, 2007; Bauer & Wilkinson, 2005; Eloff, 2007; Fourie 2008a; 2008b; 2008c; Mentz & Mentz, 2006; van der Merwe, 2007); and the integration of universities and technikons to form comprehensive institutions (Bosch, 2006; Humphrey, 2003; Jack, 2007; Muller, 2006; Nel & Strumpf, 2007; Rossouw, 2004; Tayobeka & Schoeman, 2007; van der Merwe & Möller, 2004).

As institutional identity reflects a cognitive and affective bond between the employee and the group or institution, threats to the identity could generate emotional responses in the individual or group that are threatened (Zaheer et al., 2003). According to the social identity approach, this will be even more so when the work or group serve as

an important aspect of the employee's personal (self) identity (Bartels et al., 2006). For a more detailed discussion on how mergers are perceived to impact on the pre-merger institution's identity and consequently posing a threat to employees' institutional identification, see Fourie (2008c).

A SURVIVAL KIT FOR CONSERVING THE SELF IN A MERGER

While various models and guidelines have been proposed for how mergers and incorporations should proceed during the restructuring of higher education in South Africa (see Botha, 2001; Hay & Fourie, 2002; Kilfoil & Groenewald, 2005; Menon, 2003; Sehoole, 2005; Steyn & van der Walt, 2005; Swanepoel, 2003) and the challenges and implications of these mergers and incorporations to the institutions and employees involved have been highlighted (see Arnolds & Boshoff, 2004; Bakker, 2007; Bauer & Wilkinson, 2005; Bisschoff & Nkoe, 2005; Fourie, 1999; Humphrey, 2003; Jansen, 2002b, 2003, 2004; Le Grange, 2002; Leslie, 2003; Malherbe, 2003; Paterson, 2005; Reddy, 2007; Sehoole, 2005; Soobrayan, 2003; van der Westhuizen, 2004; van der Westhuizen, 2007; Wyngaard & Kapp, 2004), it does, however, seem that, regardless of these experiences gained and lessons learned, each new merger or incorporation continued to pose a threat to, amongst others, employees' well-being and institutional identity.

How then can employees approach such an institutional change event pro-actively? Based on my own investigation of the experiences of employees of VUDEC during the incorporation into the new Unisa (see Fourie 2008a, 2008b, 2008c) and a review of available literature reporting on mergers and incorporations in international as well as South African higher education over the past decade, a survival kit in the form of ten actions for conserving the self is proposed (see Table 7 below).

Table 7. A survival kit for conserving the self in a merger

No	Action
1	Appraise the merger process positively
2	Embrace the notion that people determine the outcome of the change process
3	Adapt a real commitment to the processes of transformation, diversity management, and institutional change
4	Allow time to grieve and reflect on the gains and losses of the pre-merger institutional culture and identity
5	Avoid corridor politics to minimise rumours and misunderstandings
6	Allow time to become familiar with and to adopt the new institutional culture and identity
7	Get actively involved, participate in decision-making processes, and seek consultation
8	Focus on the opportunities for personal growth and skills development
9	Maintain social and professional networks
10	Seek professional counselling

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This manuscript reviewed merger literature in higher education with a specific focus on the human side of the restructuring of higher education in South Africa during the past decade. Although the socio-political history of the country posed unique challenges for the merger of universities and technikons and the incorporation of colleges and sub-divisions of universities into other institutions, the effect on people involved supports the findings of international mergers of higher education as well as that of corporate institutions. Finally, a survival kit for conserving the self in a merger was proposed. It is acknowledged that since this review focussed on a transformational process that is still in the making, more literature on the subject, especially relating to institutions of higher education not mentioned in the review, will most probably be published in the near future. Tayobeka and Schoeman (2007) argued that an attainable timeframe of a decade or more is needed to deliver the

objectives of the transformation process. It would be of importance to the future of higher education in South Africa to continue monitoring and reflecting on the impact of the restructuring process on institutions, employees, and society at large.

ENDNOTE

This is the fourth and last of a series of manuscripts based on my D Litt et Phil research investigation into the incorporation of VUDEC into the merger between Unisa and TSA under the title: *Mergers in higher education: Towards a survival kit for conserving the self.*

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APPENDIX 1

**SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION RESTRUCTURING PROPOSALS AND
NEW INSTITUTIONAL LANDSCAPE: 2004–2005***

January 2004
Mergers
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. University of Durban-Westville / University of Natal 2. University of North-West/Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education/and the incorporation of Vista University Sebokeng campus 3. Technikon Northern Gauteng/Technikon North-West/Pretoria Technikon 4. Unisa/TSA/and the incorporation of VUDEC
Incorporation
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. University of Fort Hare/Rhodes University East London campus 2. All the satellite campuses of Vista University, incorporated as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Port Elizabeth campus into the University of Port Elizabeth - Daveyton and Soweto campuses into the Rand Afrikaans University - Sebokeng campus into the Vaal Triangle Technikon (facilities only) - Mamelodi campus into the University of Pretoria - Bloemfontein campus into the University of Free State - Welkom campus into Technikon Free State - VUDEC into the Unisa/ TSA merger - The dissolution of the Vista Central Administration, to be concluded after the incorporation of all campuses
January 2005
Mergers
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cape Technikon/Peninsula Technikon 2. University of Port Elizabeth/Port Elizabeth Technikon 3. Rand Afrikaans University/Technikon Witwatersrand 4. University of the North/Medical University of Southern Africa 5. Border Technikon/Eastern Cape Technikon/University of Transkei 6. Durban Institute of Technology/Mangosuthu Technikon/Umlazi campus of University of Zululand

* Adapted from Ministry of Education (2003, p. 91)

EPILOGUE

Cartwright, Tytherleigh, and Robertson (2007) argue that, with few exceptions, most studies investigating the impact of mergers on employees are cross-sectional rather than longitudinal in design, and findings are based on data collected post-merger. The incorporation of VUDEC employees into the merger between Unisa and TSA, to form the new Unisa, allowed for the longitudinal capturing of employees' experiences during the various stages of the merger process. The aim of this investigation was, therefore, to build towards a framework for dealing with the human aspect during institutional transformational processes. This epilogue provides an overview of the investigation and concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the investigation, and recommendations are made.

OVERVIEW

An emergent field of enquiry in merger literature has been directed at the cultural dynamics of mergers and the emotional and behavioural responses of employees (Cartwright & Schoenberg, 2006). Given the magnitude of employees' psychological reactions to merger processes, Morán and Panasian (2005) emphasise the importance of understanding the sources of experienced stress and the way in which it affects the merged institution. This may assist management and human resource practitioners to put structures in place to assist employees in order to reduce resistance, which may in turn lead to an increase in synergy realisation. During the onset of the merger, management and the Department of Human Resources (HR) envisaged the implementation of an official change management programme to steer the integration process. Although initial meetings were arranged and proposals for such a programme were negotiated by representatives from the three institutions, this did not realise.

The need for more direct communication and clear guidance from management remained a major concern during the various stages of the incorporation process. During the pre-merger phase, employees became particularly frustrated by Vista

University management's lack of guidance and support. This was further complicated by management's resistance to the Minister of Education's decision to unbundle the university. Although some employees from VUDEC participated in integrating teams during the pre-merger phase, employees only received official permission to continue negotiating their roles and positions with the receiving institutions a few months prior to the official incorporation date.

After its 21 years of existence, the unbundling of Vista University and the subsequent incorporation of the eight campuses into larger tertiary institutions within each respective region, led to bits and pieces of Vista University's programmes and culture being either integrated into the receiving institutions or phased out. Again, employees were left to fend for themselves and to negotiate their role and position as well as the integration of the VUDEC programmes and students at the receiving institutions. In almost all academic departments, procedures were put into place for the phasing out of the VUDEC programmes, while employees became more involved with the programmes of the receiving institutions.

During the four-year implementation of the merger, management of the new institution was also criticised for not providing clear guidance and effective communication. Managers and supervisors on departmental level, however, were often acknowledged for communicating frequently with incorporated employees, allowing for information to be more readily available. The gradual integration of employees in departments and units at the new institution, and the establishment of good working relationships with new colleagues, further led to employees identifying more strongly with the new institutional culture and identity.

The need for effective leadership, clear guidance and communication is of utmost importance during all the stages of mergers and incorporations. Employees from the incorporated institution often enter the process with resistance and a sense of loss of control over their careers and future, while negotiating new positions in the merged institution. The incorporation of VUDEC employees into the merger between two

well-established institutions of higher education, posed a challenge to the negotiating powers and role that these incorporated employees would play in the formation of the new institution. Management needed to give specific attention to the human aspect – the so-called soft merger dimensions – especially during the pre- and implementation phases of the process. This was, however, not always the case, and, especially during the first couple of months, incorporated employees often found themselves isolated and left in the dark.

While a strong *us and them* discourse prevailed amongst members of the respective institutions during the initial stages of the merger process, employees, especially academic employees, experienced a sense of continuity during the transitional phase, based on the familiarity between the incorporated and incorporator departments. Employees gained the opportunity to address concerns relating to aspects such as copying with the physical move into the new working environment, negotiating positions in departments and units as well as new conditions of service. Accepting the changes associated with the incorporation was mainly influenced by the manner in which employees became integrated into respective departments or units, allowing for a more ready identification with the emerging institutional culture of the new institution.

CONCLUSION: THE FOUR MANUSCRIPTS

The structure of this thesis is in two ways unusual. First, instead of compiling one document, four independent, though interrelated manuscripts are presented. Linking with the longitudinal nature of the merger process, each of the manuscripts focuses on a specific phase or aspect of the process. Second, as seen in the sequence of the manuscripts, the thesis followed the experiences of a specific group of employees in an incorporation process, which are eventually related to the broader context of mergers in higher education in South Africa.

The following is a brief description of the main conclusions of each manuscript.

Marching up the hill: Employees prepare for an institutional incorporation

This manuscript reports on employees' preparation for the incorporation during the pre-merger phase. Experiences related to the first stages of the merger syndrome, denial, fear, anger, and sadness (Hunsaker & Coombs, 1988), were raised by participants. The perceived lack of communication from management and acute awareness of the uncertainties, anxieties, frustrations, and anger, typically experienced during institutional pre-merger phases, added to a mystifying pre-merger context. While employees experienced a strong sense of loss of control over their careers and future, enhanced by the perceived decline in the institution prior to the incorporation, academic participants embarked on negotiating their new positions with representatives from the receiving institutions. The same was, however, not true for administrative employees, who were mostly still in the dark as to where, if at all, they would be transferred to.

Vudec embraces its institutional culture on the eve of the incorporation into Unisa

This part of the investigation formed part of a larger project steered by the Institute for Education Research at Unisa. VUDEC was selected as one of six learning institutions for the investigation of institutional cultures of higher education institutions involved in post apartheid mergers. Members from governance, academic and administrative departments, as well as students gained the opportunity to reflect on VUDEC's history and contribution to higher education and in doing so, participants critically evaluated readiness for the incorporation.

The changing higher education landscape: Establishing a new identity during an institutional incorporation

Following a social identity approach, this part of the investigation focuses on employees' experiences of the four year transition and implementation of the incorporation. The important role of institutional culture and identification with the new institution is highlighted as key components in employees' adjustment during the transitional process. The vital role of effective communication and guidance from

management, the integration of institutional cultures, the need for social support, and opportunities for debriefing is further highlighted.

A critical review of the human side in merger literature: South African higher education 1998 – 2008

Mergers and incorporations are relatively new phenomena in the South African higher education landscape. This manuscript provided a critical review of both national and international merger literature with a specific view on the impact that the restructuring process in higher education in South Africa has on the people involved. Specific attention is given to the management of the change process, communication as a vehicle of change, and defining and integrating institutional culture and institutional identification. A survival kit for conserving the self in a merger is proposed.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

Metaphors of marriage, family, and stepfamilies, as mentioned in the Prologue (see p. 2), are often used to explain merger processes. As marriages see the coupling of two independent people for the purpose of creating a union or synergy, stemming from their commonalities or differences, or both, mergers also represent a coupling for the purpose of creating synergy (Dooley & Zimmerman, 2003). Koller (2002) took a harsh look at marriage metaphors in merger discourse and reflected on the co-occurrence of war and marriage metaphors. She argued for the significance of the co-occurrences of metaphors of marriage and romance with war and various derived metaphors, including rape for hostile takeovers. Most people involved in mergers are not given the choice about getting married to another institution, but instead, like in an arranged marriage, need to learn to live with a partner not completely of their choosing. Their decisions revolve around how to be in the marriage (Dooley & Zimmerman, 2003).

Writing about celebrating change during the merger process, without denying suffering, remained a continuous challenge in this investigation. While it was my

intention to focus on the celebration of change, the challenge remained not to get stuck in focussing only on the suffering of employees, often associated with merger processes. It is suggested that these two cultural poles be further investigated, with a specific view of the interrelatedness and the dynamics of the interactions between them.

As this thesis focussed primarily on the experiences of VUDEC employees during the incorporation into the merger between Unisa and TSA, it has to be acknowledged that the merger saw the bringing together of three institutional cultures and identities. The results of the investigation cannot be generalised to employees from the receiving institutions. It is, therefore, suggested that, in future studies, employees from the incorporator institution(s) also be involved in investigating the human factor of mergers.

While the majority of universities and technikons in South Africa underwent mergers and incorporations during the past decade, the higher education landscape and more specifically the national landscape of the country, did not remain stagnant. Although various issues of concern discussed in this thesis were being identified, and often very conveniently blamed as consequences of the merger, it would be interesting also to investigate the concurrent transformation in institutions and national transformation, both in terms of mergers and as the natural progression of institutional and national life and identity.

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