Reflecting on the experience of the rationalisation and consolidation of the faculties and campuses at Walter Sisulu University: successes and challenges

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ABSTRACT

One of six comprehensive universities in South Africa, the Walter Sisulu University (WSU) combines the best academic credentials from universities and technikons in an effort to effectively meet the socio-economic development needs of the nation, in the Eastern Cape Province, and the Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality, Chris Hani Municipality, King Sabata Dalindyebo Municipality. An institution of a new generation, the WSU is more than the sum of its parts. Its goal is to improve community potential through quality academic programs, research, and community engagement projects with a strong emphasis on involvement and sustainable development. This article considers the different successes and difficulties associated with the WSU rationalization and consolidation of faculties. This theoretical article observes that the government started using rationalization and consolidation as a tool to reconfigure and reorganize the higher education sector. Rationalization and consolidation are nothing new, and several nations have used them to revamp or reorganize their higher education industries. The article provides literature debates and scholarly background on comparing the South African higher education sector’s proposed rationalisation and consolidation to those of other nations’ higher education sectors; however, would reveal the most ambitious reform program ever launched in recent memory. The conceptual paper adopts a thematic qualitative approach. The primary wave of the mergers mandated by the government that happened in 2004 and 2005 was preceded by the 2002 merger of Walter Sisulu University.

INTRODUCTION

The Government’s final recommendations for the reform of the higher education sector were made public by the Minister of Education on December 9th, 2002. The announcement resulted in the establishment of a comprehensive university for the Transkei area through the incorporation of the Nelson Mandela Drive campus (NMD) of University Transkei; Zamukulungisa Site of the Eastern Cape Technikon in Mthatha Campus, Butterworth Campus, and Komani Campus of the Eastern Cape Technikon (ECT); and Potsdam and College Street, Cambridge Street of the Border Technikon into the Walter Sisulu University (WSU) in January 2004 and the subsequent merger of the Eastern Cape Technikon (ECT) and University of Transkei (UNITRA) and Border Technikon (Border TECH) in June 2006. The announcement reduced the number of higher education institutions from 36 to 21 through a process of mergers and incorporations (Aithal & Aithal, 2020)

The National Working Group (NWG) based its recommendation on the following factors:

i. The program offers of UNITRA, ECT, and Border TECH were complementary to one another in such a way that a merger would result in a good match, with strong articulation possibilities between technikons and university-type programs.
ii. Their existing programs are very different from one another, which can improve the new institution and broaden its scope. Because a more well-coordinated system of multi-level courses with horizontal and vertical mobility could be created and implemented, a wider range of occupational needs could be covered.

iii. Providing access to more students would definitely help to increase the Transkei area's participation rate. For undergraduate diplomas and degrees, many students are enrolled in UNITRA, ECT, and Border TECH (Masiteng, 2020).

In this context, it is both feasible and desirable to implement large-scale rationalization through methods of coordination and consolidation. The efforts of 7 new Faculties, such Faculty of Education, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Faculty of Management and Public Admin Sciences, Faculty of Engineering, Built Environment and Information Technology, Faculty of Economic and Financial Sciences, Faculty of Law, Humanities & Social Sciences, and Faculty of Natural Sciences the aim of these faculties is to develop a research culture are still in their early phases. Consolidating these efforts could improve research initiatives, capacity, and resources in the Transkei region.

Instead of duplicating program offerings along present lines, individual programs may be distributed throughout several campuses to promote mobility, engagement, and a sense of community. NMD, Butterworth, Komani and Potsdam campuses should be implemented into the new combined institution as part of the merger procedure. This would facilitate the integration of students from various racial and ethnic backgrounds (Ponomareva, Stumpf, Tcypkin, & Kozlov, 2019). Institutions of civil society continue to be areas of continual conflict and are less willing to reform than the ANC-controlled state, which aggressively pursues a revolutionary agenda. Universities, like other civil society institutions, can be seen to function in contradictory ways by reproducing, eroding, transforming, or remaining consciously unaware of ingrained and prevalent social relations if they are not simplistically conceived as monolithic coherent blocs but rather as composed of various constituencies (faculty, departments, students, administrators and workers) (Reddy, 2004).

The demands for better effectiveness, higher quality, and fewer public resources have caused an ongoing increase in the number of countries extensively examining the structure of their higher education institutions, which frequently leads to major adjustments (Skodvin, 1999). The challenge of rationalization and consolidation in higher education leads to anxiety and stress for employees. To this point, it is important to evaluate how rationalization and consolidation impact on employees whose conditions of service must change. This paper, therefore, intends to present the procedure that should be followed during the process of rationalization and consolidation.

Theoretical and Conceptual Background

Rationalisation and Consolidation Defined

Reorganizing a business to improve operational efficiency is known as rationalization. A change in policy or a change in strategy with regard to specific items offered may result from this type of reorganization, as well as an expansion or contraction in the size of the business. A rationalization is more extensive than a restructuring and typically involves both structural and strategic adjustments. A corporation needs rationalization if it wants to boost sales, save expenses, and boost its bottom line (Kenton, 2022).

In today's fiercely competitive market, businesses seek to choose an effective service provider (SP) to enhance the performance of their supply chains (Gardas, Raut, Jagtap, & Yadav, 2019).

Consolidation is the act or process of consolidating, making firm, or uniting; the state of being consolidated while rationalization is a statement of one’s motives, or of the causes of some event (Winchester, & Green, 2019). Consolidation is a reduction in the number of physical servers, while rationalization is the reduction of the variety of different server types.

Neo-Institutional Theories

This article uses Neo-institutional theory to understand organizational behavior as situated in and influenced by other organizations and wider social forces—especially broader cultural rules and beliefs. Initial scholarship theorized and documented how the construction of broader cultural rules constituted actors and facilitated organizational isomorphism—the growing similarity of organizations in a field. Subsequently, the scope of the theory was expanded to account for the transformation and change of institutions, as well as the heterogeneity of actors and practices in fields. This has spawned new strands of theorizing such as that related to the institutional logics perspective. While the neo-institutional theory is most closely informed by ideas and debates in sociology and management, it also draws from cognitive and social psychology, anthropology, political science, and economics (Lounsbury & Zhano, 2013).

Critiques and Challenges

The neo-institutional theory has been criticized extensively. Perrow (1986) argues that it largely ignores power, especially the power of large corporations. (Donaldson 1995: 79–128) provides a trenchant critique of neo-institutional theory, from the perspective of a structural contingency theorist. Cooper, et al. (2008) complain that neo-institutional theory has a conservative bias, and they urge more engagement with critical theories. Mizruchi and Fein (1999) document how much neo-institutional research has a claimed focus on mimesis, to the relative exclusion of coercive and normative pressures, even though the mechanisms being captured by empirical
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Although numerous activist groups (such as unions, lecturers, and stakeholders of the organizations) have objected, the adoption of such rules has mainly been successful. This article analyses education-related remarks, events, newspaper articles as it goes, and other policy reports from 1995 to 2000 in an effort to identify the nature of its early restructuring success. I contend that comprehension of the implementation methods and tactics, or the rationalization process, is a necessary component of success. I contend that policies created at one spatial level function quite differently at another, and the spatial inconsistencies that come from this process contribute to the persistence of neo-liberal ideas and educational inequities (Basu, 2004).

It is contended that nonprofit mergers happen when there is a common concern for long-term financial stability, together with benefits that can be foreseen from the merger and backing from outside sources. The investigation of this paper points to high levels of anxiety and stress among the affected employees. In this regard, it is important that rationalization and consolidation should be based on an extensive stakeholder consultation process. Labour unions will represent employees should take the lead to ensure that consultation will done on a fair basis. There is a need for different consultation clusters for affected employees to seek help where necessary. To this point, it is important to note that financial compensation is critical to the affected employees. Finally, employee well-being should be the top priority during the process of rationalisation and consolidation. This article acknowledges the benefits of rationalisation and consolidation such as financial savings, elimination of duplication courses in different campuses as well as reducing looted management structures. It is important to note that rationalisation and consolidation offer opportunities on related courses to be offered on one campus. Whilst we acknowledge the benefits of rationalisation and consolidation these benefits, can only be achieved if all stakeholders are moving in the same direction. Rationalisation and consolidation can be a successful strategy for enhancing the long-term viability of nonprofit organizations and the sector as a whole (Cartwright & Schoenberg, 2006).

Rationalisation and consolidation should provide empowerment of employees as well as learning that is both transformative and empowering (Harvey, 2000). The last thing that rationalisation and consolidation must never do, is lead to job losses. In essence, before rationalization and consolidation are implemented, each employee must be guaranteed that the job is safe. Other examples of studies from knowledge-intensive organizations, such as museums (Geschwind, 2019), accentuate how one might influence organizational change via Technical Universities’ Organizational Identities, Boundaries, and Change Processes 4 Multiple professional identities, some of which may be in conflict, coexist inside the same organization. The body of existing research advises beginning the study of identity processes with the supposition that HEI local narratives serve as a means of communicating organizational identity (Wollscheid, & Røsdal, 2021).

Prior research has shown the significant reliance of Higher Education Institutions’ identity-building on cross-organizational comparison. However, it has been challenging to identify the precise mechanisms and the underlying logic that create patterns of organizational behavior through identification with different entities. Within higher education institutions, the intricate interplay between university operations and several levels of institutional and organizational complexity poses intrinsic challenges to the study of organizational identity. (Mushaathoni, 2021)

Perceptions of Staff on Rationalisation and Consolidation

Higher education institutions, both public and commercial, are turning to consolidations as a rebranding tactic to meet budgetary constraints and maintain competitiveness (Watson, 2020).

Nevertheless, despite their crucial role, little is known about how these employees participate in decision-making and carrying it out. Examples include what causes to support or what kinds of fundraising activities to create, what inspires them to get involved, and how their decision-making and altruistic behavior may differ from that of managers and business owners (Breeze, & Wiekping, 2020). Multinational corporations’ operational flexibility can yield benefits, but uncertainty is a stronger factor when making relocation decisions. Costs associated with relocation and the dangers involved in such operations are the primary forces for migration in the industry (Lampón, 2020). I argue that, stress manifests itself in a variety of ways. High stress levels can lead to a number of health problems, including ulcers, hypertension, irritability, difficulty making decisions, appetite loss, and accident proneness. Job unhappiness can also be caused by stress. Stressed-out employees may exhibit a wide range of behavioral patterns, including altered sleep patterns, increased smoking, increased alcohol consumption, altered food habits, and changes in productivity or absenteeism. The stressed person may have psychological trauma as a result of this stress-related behavior, which could then have an impact on their personal and professional lives (Lalla, 2009).

Relocation of Staff Members

For senior citizens, moving can be upsetting and even traumatic, especially if it is an involuntary transfer (Melrose, 2019). According to Jirek (2020), the effects on the workers can be broken down into four categories: stress, increased workload, survivor guilt, and psychological trauma. The employees’ responses can range from sadness to despair to rage. According to this paper, a major factor
in the trauma an employee may go through during a merger is that their jobs become a part of their lives, and they may internalize a lot of the issues as being unique to them. This trauma could result in a decline in morale, a loss of faith in the employer, and sadness that would afterward affect productivity at work.

Allard, Feyt, Fourny, & Talandier (2014) argued that because of the growing population and the variety of activities individuals engage in, mobility is becoming an increasingly important concern. Most activities, whether they are recreational or work-related, need travel. Since travel is a derived activity, the mode of transportation used must, in part, reduce the amount of time required to get to the chosen activity location. The management of WSU was taken to improve the infrastructure system to travel by university shuttle, specifically for those who will travel up to 120 kilometers to and from work. This article provides better ways to understand which factors affect the utility variation related to commuting mobility when major changes influence the community patterns of a large community, and how this understanding can help the university develop effective measures to incentivize sustainable mobility behaviour.

International Perspectives to Rationalisation and Consolidation of Faculties and Campuses

Aside from moving to reduce labour costs and adhere to sourcing, the primary internationalization strategies used by businesses in this industry have been intra-corporate reorganizations (Barkas, Honeck & Rubio, 2020). In the past, component makers have rearranged and streamlined their global production capacity to attain production efficiency, particularly through economies of scale (Notteboom, Pallis, & Rodrigue, 2021). Operational flexibility has allowed MNEs to optimize their production networks through the application of corporate production restructuring strategies. Such tactics have been used to characterize some of the sector's relocation efforts, forcing businesses to change their organizational and geographic structures and enhancing intra-corporate flows across units (Rugiero, 2019).

Reduced government funding also forced institutions to increase their tuition and other revenue-generating efforts. Put another way, this meant that they had to pay closer attention to the markets for their research, teaching, and related activities and become more cognizant of the commercial world. As market forces, rather than explicit policies, increasingly shaped university structures, the public benefit of higher education was declining. Increasing the vulnerability of marginal institutions was one result (Kurer, 2020). Higher education in Canada was in transition at the time of the mergers at the centre of this book. It follows that those mergers had features both of mergers in a state-dominated environment and of mergers had features both of mergers in the American-style, market-driven environment. In both mergers, governments played an important and traditional role: that said, other factors were involved, including institutional considerations of capacity and image in relation to changing markets for education and research.

Several paradigms have been developed to explain higher education mergers (Zamora-Polo & Sánchez-Martín, 2019). Common to most of them is the assumption that mergers in higher education are prompted by changes in the external environment, whether those changes take the form of escalating demands for education and research, diminishing resources, changing markets, threats to the continuous supply of critical resources, obstacles to organic growth, or changing ecological niches. A merger is a means of responding to environmental threats and opportunities (Awan, Arnold, & Gölgeci, 2021).

Successes and challenges of rationalisation and consolidation

Walter Sisulu University (WSU) promises not to lay off employees as a result of rationalizing and consolidating its campuses and faculties. Rather, there will be increased chances for employees' professional growth, particularly for those who choose to pursue postgraduate studies. By dividing up the workload so that employees can mark assignments and discuss chapters with one another. By authoring papers and disseminating the research, the university's research throughput rate will increase. An important factor in this case will be the location of the faculties. For instance, the faculty of education will be in Komani; the faculty of law, natural sciences, health sciences, and humanities are based in Mthatha campus; and the built environment and ICT will be in Buffalo City Campus (Potsdam Site); the faculty of management and business sciences will be in Butterworth; and the faculty of health sciences, law, natural sciences will be in Mthatha, Nelson Mandela Campus, and Zamukulungisa Site. Division of resources to the faculties will be the past of the day (pers. comm. Songca, 2022). However, the desire for speed had to be balanced against legal requirements and ensure that the process was conducted fairly. Consultation with the unions was therefore undertaken in accordance with section 189A of the Labour Relations Act in an attempt to move towards a streamlined and unified organizational structure for the administrative, academic support services, and academic structures and posts. It is envisaged that the various posts within the approved administrative and academic structures will be filled by the end of May 2007. Every attempt was made to align the process of placing staff with the institutional strategic priorities but the pressure to retain jobs to avoid retrenchments wherever possible has not always made this entirely possible. Council instructed Executive Management to reduce salary expenditure from 68% to 62% over a three-year timeframe from the time of the merger but this has been difficult to achieve given the need to: – employ additional academic staff in certain under-provided disciplines and programs to ensure a more favourable staff-student ratio; – convert a number of posts from contracts to permanent positions where employees had been in the contract post for more than three to five years; The need for speed had to be weighed against the need to follow the law and make sure the procedure was carried out properly, though. As a result, in line with section 189A of the Labour Relations Act, union consultation was conducted in an effort to create a more streamlined and cohesive organizational structure for academic structures and posts, academic support services, and administrative functions (Stumpf, 2007).
It is hoped that all of the positions within the authorized academic and administrative bodies will be occupied as per the union. Although every effort was made to match the hiring process with the institutional strategic aims, this has not always been achievable due to the pressure to keep employees in order to prevent layoffs wherever feasible.

However, this has proven challenging to accomplish because of the need to: - hire more academic staff in certain under-provided disciplines and programs to ensure a more favourable staff-student ratio; - convert a number of contract positions to permanent positions where employees had held the contract posts for more than three to five years. As a result, the faculty of education was requested to decrease its budget by 50 million rand. Therefore, the faculty was forced and bound to make changes to the positions that were allocated to the faculty, for example, professorship to be changed to senior lecturer or be cut off for a period of a while.

In this process of rationalization and consolidation, this is where the essential duplication on some campuses is detrimental. Something that runs counter to the goals the university has set forth. Despite these unanswered problems, many had altered their minds and realized that reforming French universities was necessary to broaden their scope, rationalize their educational offerings, and build on their strengths in particular research areas. One method of starting this process of strategic change was through mergers and partnerships. Whether this was the least painful and most effective approach to accomplish such goals is still up for debate. Several universities are opposing the movement at the same time. The engineering schools in other regions of France were more concerned with maintaining their individuality and autonomy. In the future, it will be interesting to observe if these institutions have trouble carving out a space for themselves (Sursock, 2015). When compared to foreign colleges, WSU can accomplish its objective of being unique so that faculty funding is allocated effectively.

The Psychological Impact of Relocation

One aspect of a larger range of employment-related geographic mobility is long-distance labour commuting (LDLC), in which workers are required to travel great distances (usually more than 200 km) and spend the night away from home (Ohman and Lindgren Citation 2003). Judy & D'amico (1997) argued that local communities need to take advantage of the opportunities and challenges presented by the trend toward mobility workforces. Ryser, Markey, Halseth, & Welch (2019) conquered one aspect of a larger range of employment-related geographic mobility is long-distance labour commuting (LDLC), in which workers are required to travel great distances (usually more than 200 km) to and from work will be an advantage to those will be using university shuttle. Local communities need to take advantage of the opportunities and challenges presented by the trend toward mobility workforces. Mthatha or Butterworth staff will join the Komani staff and vice versa East London staff to Mthatha staff will be looking for a place to sleep while working for a university.

Stress

Robust literature shows the stress of relocation according to these authors (Conrad, Koire, Pinder-Amaker, & Liu, (2021). Moving has been linked to depressive symptoms, and college students report moving as a difficult life event (Reyes-Rodriguez, Watson, Barrio, Baucom, Silva, Luna-Reyes, & Bulik, 2019). Following a disaster, populations that are forced to migrate experience higher rates of anxiety and sadness because of the potential risks to relationships, identity, sense of control, and social support (Conrad, Koire, Pinder-Amaker & Liu, 2021). After a potentially traumatic event, moving suddenly might lead to psychological stress and restrict access to resources necessary for healthy coping and rehabilitation (Faherty, Schwartz, Ahmed, & Uscher-Pines, 2019). According to Hendriks et al. (2016), young adults who have recently moved may encounter disruptions in their routine, allocate less time for leisure activities, and derive less pleasure from socializing.

Conclusions

This article suggests the following: Government-initiated mergers (forced mergers) are less likely to fail because of a larger national agenda; when institutions go through major changes, like a merger, leadership must adopt a new, all-embracing style; and where trade unions are present, they will become strong forces if people management issues are neglected or handled poorly during the merger. To overcome past cultural barriers, a new cultural identity must be established early in the merger by sharing the new vision and mission of the new entity. Mergers can be understood and managed in three distinct phases, namely the pre-merger phase, the integration phase, and the consolidation phase. There are also several merger steps. An understanding of mergers has been gained through analyzing the processes, methods, and procedures of the WSU merger. Regarding the perception survey of the amalgamated institutions, respondents noticed some advances in efficiency as well as benefits to the academic objectives. The number of students entering higher education increased. Regarding their physical resources, particularly their facilities for teaching and learning, few people were complimentary (Chetty, 2010). The administration of the institution emphasized that no jobs would be lost. Some even thought it would sound better if all programs were offered at one location during the rationalization of faculties and campus consolidation, such as the faculty of business sciences, and faculty of education (Chetty, 2010).

WSU has undergone different consolidation and rationalization than Tshwane University of Technology (TUT). The rationale is that, in the instance of TUT, there are roughly 25 to 35 kilometres separating the campuses. In contrast to WSU, it is 120 kilometers from East London to Butterworth and from Butterworth to Mthatha between the campuses. Considering that it is 220 kilometers from Mthatha to Komani and 200 kilometers from East London to Komani (Mvenene, 2020). It is advised that the employer must have a plan in place for the relocation of workers to other campuses, particularly for those who will join campuses that are too far...
away from their homes in terms of kilometers; in this case, the distance between East London to Komani and East London to Mthatha, and vice versa, is 200 kilometers or more. Like those who travel daily from East London to Butterworth, Mthatha to Butterworth, or vice versa, they cannot manage to commute. In order to pay for the housing of employees who are relocated, the employer can arrange with the landlords. Employer-built staff cottages must be constructed where the WSU site is available for future plans. The objective is also to provide evidence of the possible impacts of some commuting measures. The conclusion of this paper might be taken into account to discuss the implementation of sustainable transport measures. In this respect, universities, it can be argued, have a pivotal role in fostering social and technological innovation for sustainable development, through research, education, and civic engagement (Allard, et al, 2014). That being said, this article makes the recommendation that research be carried out to see whether rationalizing faculties and consolidating campuses both during and after the procedure will be feasible. This article appears particularly relevant in a period in which WSU and its member States are figuring out how to redesign the economic crisis triggered by the transition.

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