

How Well Do University Staff Understand Transformation? A Case of a Merged South African University

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ABSTRACT Higher education institutions in South Africa have been merged with high expectations and lofty goals which have spawned a plethora of challenges including tensions and clashes amongst the key stakeholders in their understanding of transformation. This study aims to provide a perspective on the course of the transformation process post-merger and incorporation of the Durban University of Technology (DUT). The study is grounded in both quantitative and qualitative involving a structured questionnaire and in-depth interviews with the university leaders. The questionnaires generated the reliability coefficient Alpha of 0.947. The non-probability purposive sampling was used for the qualitative approach. This study demonstrates a disproportionately high percentage of the university leaders as having limited understanding of the transformation agenda of the university and its responses to transformation challenges.

INTRODUCTION

The merged and incorporated institutions in South Africa seem to be caught up in cultural clashes, racism, gender inequalities, resistance to change, exodus of leadership, centralist leadership styles with less focus on defining the transformation agenda of the university. Martins and Joubert (2013: 112) investigated that the institutions of higher education continue to grapple with transformation issues due to additional pressure from stakeholders, including students, the business community and donors.

The term “transformation” can assume multiple meanings and definitions dependent on the context from which it emerges (Seedat et al. 2014: 69). Transformation is one word that captures the social, economic and political imperatives and aspirations that followed the collapse of apartheid and the onset of democracy in South Africa (Wangenge-Ouma 2010: 481).

Seedat et al. (2014: 70) argued that within higher education it may imply either transformation of the transformation of the student via learning, transformation of the institution to enable transformative outcomes or both. Although there is a tendency to limit transformation to racial and gender composition of students and staff in gauging whether the institution has transformed, it actually comprises broad factors such as sexual orientation of the workforce to ensure equitable representation at all levels. Martins

and Joubert (2013: 112) explored that the transformation agenda in UNISA covers the entire spectrum of the strategic planning process, including the vision, mission, values and institutional operations.

Ncayiyane and Hayward (2007: 23) agreed that the ‘transformation’ in South Africa elicited different tensions and expectations from different constituencies. Different researchers in South Africa have defined transformation in terms of race (Francis and Hemson 2010); efficiency (Ntshoe 2004) and Seedat et al. (2014: 70); change (Meyer and Botha 2004; Ngara 2003) and change of organizational strategy and structure, systems and processes, measurements and controls, culture and expectations, costs and capabilities (Oloyede 2007). On the account of the stated dimensions and a host of arguments advanced by different researchers, the present research study advances further analysis in transformation, post mergers and incorporations based on the perspectives and views of university leaders, using the case of the Durban University of Technology (DUT). The primary objective of this study is thus to provide an insight into the broader understanding of transformation post-merger and incorporation of the University of Technology.

Literature Review

A host of researchers have attempted to analyse factors that may drive the transformation

agenda in higher education institutions. These include Ncayiyane and Hayward (2007), on the expectations and tensions of different stakeholders; Kavangh and Ashkanasy (2006), on the purpose of mergers; and Mapasela and Hay (2005) on higher education policies. Zide (2010: 120) argues that a transformation agenda of any institution should be aligned to its institutional strategic planning process. The Soudien Report (2008: 111) has articulated the transformation agenda by rooting all forms of discrimination; Shields (2010: 2) on robust understanding of dialogue, moral courage and activism; and Ramphela (2008) and Zide (2010: 650) on open public debates.

The present study interrogates the underlying perspectives as regard to understanding transformation at DUT guided by the aforementioned discussions on its facets. It extends the previous conversations by interrogating operational, individual, and departmental or faculty, as well as institutional and societal effects that could add on the realization of the transformational agenda of the university and that of the country. The DUT is an ideal case study to interrogate such factors that have a potential to influence the transformation agenda, as it is the first example of a merger incorporating a previously advantaged and a questionably disadvantaged institution in the higher education landscape in South Africa.

The institutional debates on the realization of the transformation agenda have a potential, through responsive curricula, to positively impact on societies. The transformation of the curriculum is therefore at the heart of institutional response to societal needs (Fourie 1999) and societal development (Zide 2010: 68). Ngara (2003) contends that the curriculum is a key element because it determines whether students acquire competencies and capabilities that turn them into thinkers, leaders and responsible citizens with a capacity to make a real contribution to societal development. Ncayiyane and Hayward (2007: 23) stated that transformation includes institutional funding, student financing, curricula reform, student access and success, academic research, institutional culture, as well as equity and gender issues.

There are number of researchers who claim that HEIs are pressured to meet the social transformation and skills needs (Kistan 2002); improve on its policy and delivery performance

and reducing the demographic difference between student intake and graduate throughput (Jafferet al. 2007). This study extends their arguments further and interrogates them whether the curricula in the merged institutions do respond to societal, national, business and economic needs.

To operate successfully in the global economy South Africa needs to transform its higher education system and partner in a globalised world (Moja 2004); reform curriculum to meet the challenges of globalization and the knowledge society (Ensor 2004: 340); and develop an emancipator and broad-based social and political agenda (Singh 2001: 9).

The South African higher education ministry has promulgated a number of policies, directing institutions of higher education to adopt both institutional and national transformation agendas. Mapasela and Hay (2005) provide an in depth analysis of the most important higher education policies and initiatives developed by the democratically elected government of South Africa post-1994, to transform the South African higher education system. They stress transforming the socio-political state of the country to respond to national higher education policy imperatives and transformation that may need to be espoused in South Africa.

The Soudien Report (2008: 103) indicated that a precondition of the successful transformation of the higher education system is, as White Paper 3 argues, the “transformation of the structures, values and culture of governance” (White Paper 3: 3.1). Kulati and Moja (2007: 166) state that there has been confusion with regard to the scope of responsibility of governing structures, with students often challenging the role of councils as the primary governing body, and seeking instead to establish institutional forums as structures of governance alternate to the authority of management. A survey conducted out of 35 institutions revealed fairly widespread complaints, amongst students, workers and other constituencies, that gaining access to governing structures had not led to empowerment, nor to effective participation (Cloete 2007: 276). This study investigates whether transformation is aligned to the university strategy [as regard to governance of the university]. This study is in accordance with the researcher’s arguments on the administrative staff’s questionable performance; and the

present study investigates whether transformation is set for success by competent leaders in DUT.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Quantitative Approach

A mixed-methods approach (Cresswell 2009) was employed along with both a structured questionnaire that reached a large number of employees at leadership positions (junior to middle) which made possible the quantification of the findings. In-depth interviews, targeting university leaders at middle and senior management positions, were also undertaken. The interviews were piloted on mid-level and senior leaders to gauge their understanding of transformation post-merger and incorporation at DUT. This was conducted before using a questionnaire to collect descriptive data.

The study employed a stratified random sampling of 191 respondents, ideal to test for the finding's reliability and validity, distributed equitably between academic and non-academic leaders with university leadership between Peromnes Grades 8 and 6 (junior and middle management) as the total population. A structured questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale was developed with a range from (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) undecided, (4) agree and (5) strongly agree, to capture perspectives and views of the sampled university leaders through leading statements.

Qualitative Approach

The qualitative aspect of this study employed a non-probability purposive sampling to survey 28 university leaders in middle and senior management positions. In-depth interviews were conducted with 28 academic and non-academic leaders from Peromnes Grades 1 to 5 as well as key stakeholders, including trade unions and Student Representative Council (SRC). These include 1 Vice Chancellor and Principal, 3 Deputy Chancellors: Academic, Research and Administration, 6 Faculty Deans, 4 Executive Management members, Registrar, Director: Human Resources and Finance. Further, 6 academic Heads of Departments, one Research Director and one Director for Quality Directorate and Marketing and Communication were inter-

viewed. Further, in-depth interviews were conducted with presidents (2) and secretaries of trade unions and SRC (2) respectively.

Data Collection

The data were collected over a three-month period from May to July 2013. Of the total of 191 questionnaires distributed, 133 responses were received-a 70 percent response rate. To maintain confidentiality, the questionnaires were distributed and collected in person. The Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha values for individual dimension were high and a reliability coefficient of 0.947 was recorded.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data collected from the respondents was analyzed using SPSS, version 12 for data capturing, presentation, analysis and interpretation. Descriptive statistics was used for data analysis and interpretation. The NVivo software (version 10) was used for organizing, analysing and sharing data.

Researchers' Role and Recording of Data

Permission was requested and granted from the DUT ethics committee to conduct the study, and consent was formally obtained from the participants. Simultaneously, the confidentiality of participants was maintained at all times and guaranteed and participation thereof was anonymous. A pilot study was undertaken prior to conducting a full-scale study.

FINDINGS

The qualitative and frequency analysis was conducted to establish the understanding of transformation within the university, which necessitated strategic change management interventions. The in-depth interviews had only one question pertaining to the respondent's understanding of transformation post-merger and incorporation. The structured questionnaire had ten leading statements interrogating the respondent's understanding of transformation on various factors. Almost 50% of the research participants had an understanding of the transformation agenda of the university; about 30% had a contrary view. This study also demonstrated

more than half (54%) of the research participants as understanding the nature of transformation problems within the university. Only 19% of the research participants had an opposite understanding, which is far less than the disagreement observed in the understanding of the transformation agenda. Furthermore, the study shows more than 40% (42%) of the research participants as understanding transformation solutions of the university. The latter findings also shows a large number of respondents (35%) as undecided regarding university leaders understanding of the transformation solutions, which is the highest as compared to other all variables of the study. Only 23% of the research participants had opposite views that university leaders understand transformation solutions. Nearly half (48%) of the respondents said that they had an understanding of the importance of transformation in responding to societal needs; while a about a fifth (21%) stated different understanding, about a third (31%) were undecided.

In this study, the largest consensus (with 57% response rate) regarding transformation pertains to addressing pressing national needs; only one in five (21%) had an opposite view. The present study has the lowest consensus (with 41% response rate) of the research participants who regarding transformation pertains to eliminating waste. Only one in five (21%) had opposite view. This finding had the highest percentages (30%) of those who were undecided in this study.

The present research study indicated 51% of the research participants' understanding that transformation gives effect to new policies. Only 23% of them have the opposite understanding regarding the latter statement. Only 54% of the university leaders have an understanding of transformation as changing institutional culture; one in four (26%) had the opposite understanding. Half of the research participants have an understanding that transformation influences employees to adhere to university core values. Only 26% have an opposite understanding. This study's findings show the highest percentage of 56% of the research participants' understanding that transformation promotes knowledge sharing. Only 23% of the research participants have a different understanding regarding this statement.

Major Findings

The major highlights of this study show a high level understanding of the university leaders' as regards to transformation as: pertaining mostly to pressing national needs (57%); promoting knowledge sharing (56%); changing institutional culture and understanding of transformation problems (54%). Another highlight of this study is that almost half (49%) of the respondents had understandings of the transformation agenda of the university. The fact that more than (51%) of the research participants were either undecided or against it, reflects uneasy scenario that transformation is known by only few leaders. The majority of the research participants (54%) understood transformation problems facing the university as compared to a lower percentage (42%) of those that understood transformation solutions in this university with the highest percentage of the undecided (35%).

The qualitative observations on the understanding of transformation within DUT were categorized into three nodes or themes, which are internal (1) and external (2) (factors) and on operational activities (3). The findings indicate the total coverage of the research participants understanding transformation as based on internal factors, which include transforming the curriculum and the creation of the research culture, changed student attitudes and behaviour, staff demographics, conducive management systems, programme specialization and increased numbers of women graduates on scarce skills qualifications such as in Engineering. As a member of the senior management team in the university reflected:

"Transformation is a broad term looking at the way you respond to the current needs of society in terms of curriculum and how responsive is the curriculum and how it takes care of the experiences of students as customers. It also refers to the management system's creating an enabling environment so that people can do things and how it impacts on student experience. Transformation refers to improving the research culture where it was and where it should be."

The respondents referred to their understanding of transformation as based on the external factors at DUT with the total coverage of as: responding to current societal needs, experiences of students on campus, legislative reforms,

changes in government, industry, South African demographics and global changes. Concurrent with the previous passage, a member of the senior management team pointed out:

“Transformation is kind of self-inflicting and is dependent on the external environment; government policy and procedures force university to change. For example, transformation in curricula in universities should not have changed by its initiatives but have been forced by government because of changes in the sector, industry and changes in leadership. Transformation is influenced by external forces, legislative reforms and curriculum renewal and it has been forced by the DoHET, government, industry, sector and internal management”.

The research findings revealed that transformation was understood by the research participants as based on redressing past imbalances such as staff, student and post-graduate representation, management, demographic changes, the move from apartheid into democratic government, people living with disabilities redressing the institutional structures and better balance in terms of racial composition. According to the Head of Department (non-academic):

“Transformation has to do with the participation of the previously disadvantaged groups for example, women and people living with disabilities. Transformation means moving from apartheid to democracy. Transformation refers to the participation from all stakeholders to university structures. Transformation refers to what needs to be done to redress the imbalances of the demographics of staff, students and postgraduates”

The research participants' revelation of their understanding of transformation has been also expressed within the purview of operational activities. The respondents cited restructuring or realignment, teaching and learning, retention of students, access, streamlining of functions, focus on key goals, culture and mind-set changes. In reference to this some of the observations were observed from a senior member of the university:

“I have restructured the faculty to allow realignment of the faculty between the core function and the following committees were established: Teaching and learning, assessments, access and retention of students; research and higher degrees; and health and safety”. I've also streamlined our functions which allow for capacity building”

Furthermore, the participants indicated clear communication, definition of roles and responsibilities and inclusive recruitment and selection processes as features of transformation within the university. Concurrent to the latter statement, a respondent from a trade union indicated that:

“Transformation refers to clear communication, roles and responsibilities to be clearly defined. Recruitment and selection in HR was operating without policies with timeframes and the HR Scoring system was poor”

The results, as gleaned from the in-depth interview, reveal that the term “transformation” in a higher education institution is multifaceted and has multi-perspective connotations. The findings also show internal and external factors, such as redressing past imbalances with mainstreamed operational activities responding to students, employees, society, industry or business, government and global needs as the main cornerstones of transformation in higher education institutions.

The findings revealed the multiplicity of factors shaping institutional and national transformational agendas. The transformational agenda has been seen as influenced by internal and external factors. The internal have been identified as influencing transformation, which includes: student access and retention, change in attitude and behaviour, streamlined functions and business processes with the aim of aiding efficiencies. Operational activities also focus on achieving the set goals of the university with the aim of improving the effectiveness, programme specialization, restructuring and change of culture and mind-set as pillars influencing the transformation agenda of the university. Another central element that shapes the transformation agenda in higher education institutions are core factors (internal) which are the cornerstones of universities' existence. These factors include curriculum reforms, research productivity, quality learning and teaching, staff and student demographics reflecting provincial and national statistics, funding, equity of input (women in the engineering field which has been previously dominated by males in South Africa) and equity of output and improvement of qualifications.

The present study suggests that operational and core factors (internal) revealed by the study findings are influenced or shaped by external factors (including rapid legislative reforms,

changes in government, industry, funding, South African demographics, global changes and societal needs) in order for the transformation agenda to be realised.

DISCUSSION

The primary objective of the study was to investigate how university leaders understand transformation post-merger and incorporation of the higher education institution. Almost half (49%) of the respondents had an understanding of the transformation agenda of the university. This is in agreement with Martins and Joubert (2013: 112) and Zide's (2010) argument that the transformation agenda should be aligned to the institutional strategic planning process of the university. The majority of the respondents (54%) having an understanding of the transformation problems within this university, is in keeping with Martins and Joubert (2013: 112) that HEIs grapple with transformation issues due to additional pressure from stakeholders. This is also in concurrence with Chalufu (2002), Cohen (2006), and May and Mason (2007) who had observed tensions post-mergers and incorporations in different HEIs. Meanwhile, published literature on the respondents' understanding of transformation solutions at this university was not available, which made it difficult to find the current interventions or strategies for providing solutions to transformational problems facing higher education institutions. The university leaders' understanding that transformation pertains to pressing national needs, responds to the RSA DoE (1997) requirements that the government now expects a transformed higher education system to meet national needs for personal power and development.

The high percentage of the respondents, who had an understanding that transformation refers to changing institutional culture, is in accordance with Ncayiyane and Hayward (2007), who indicated that transformation includes institutional culture. However, these researchers do not clearly articulate on how institutional culture can define transformation, which is the focal point of this study. The university leaders' understanding of transformation, as based on transforming curricula, has been echoed by Schmitza (1998a) and Watson et al. (2009), who also cautioned about curriculum standardization which is associated with the need for curriculum

change or restructuring. The research results revealed that operational and internal of the study are influenced or shaped by the external factors (including rapid legislative reforms, changes in government, industry, funding, South African demographics, global changes and societal needs) to realize the transformation agenda. This analogy has been disputed by Francis and Hemson (2010) who have referred transformation to race; while Seedat et al. (2014: 70) likened it to efficiency and Wangenge-Ouma (2010: 481) mentioning collapse of apartheid.

CONCLUSION

The present study observed that just under half of the respondents have an understanding of the transformation agenda of this university. This raises serious concerns about the strategic stance, direction and efforts of the university in achieving the transformation agenda, as more than half of the respondents are either opposed or undecided about their understanding of the transformation agenda. This is supported by the highest percentage of the respondents who agreed that they understand the nature of transformation problems within the university. This suggests that the university does not have an agenda or plan to resolve matters brought by transformation in the post-merger and incorporation era of this university. The most notable finding supporting the aforesaid conclusion was that the highest percentage of the university leaders who had contrary views and undecided about their understanding of the transformation solutions within the university. Another important observation of this study was that a majority of the respondents understood the transformation as pertaining to pressing national needs, which was also confirmed by the findings gleaned from the in-depth interviews. The major highlight of the study was on the respondents' understanding of transformation as changing institutional culture. This study suggests that the transformational agenda can be influenced by operational, internal and external factors. This paper concludes that internal factors that define transformation include student access and retention and achieving the set university goals. Further, the internal factors which include curriculum reform, research productivity and quality learning and teaching are regarded as the cornerstone of transformation in this university.

This paper further concludes that external factors including legislative reforms, societal and ever-changing global needs directly influence transformation in this university.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The present paper suggests that the university should have an all-encompassing strategic plan with clear and measurable transformation goals, outputs and outcomes in place in order for all university leaders to understand and act upon it. The transformational challenges or problems emanating in the post-merger and incorporation necessitates the university to have transformational solutions in place in a form of a scorecard. The university leaders should ensure that the transformation initiatives and activities as well as problems and solutions are known by all key-stakeholders of the university (internal and external). Further, the university transformation challenges should be prioritized by the university leaders and be included in their performance agreement plans to provide implementable solutions.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

One aspect of limitation as regard to the study was a paucity of published literature on certain factors pertaining to higher education institutions solutions to problems brought by transformation post-merger and incorporations, eliminating wastage and knowledge sharing in relation to transformation. Another limitation was on access to information relating to the transformation charter or strategy of the university. Failure to interview senior leaders who occupy critical positions (including Finance and Maintenance) which are alleged to be untransformed in HEIs limited the study findings.

FUTURE STUDIES

Researchers in the future may consider undertaking studies that investigate possible solutions to real and anticipated problems brought by transformation of higher education institutions in South Africa. Further, future studies should investigate whether knowledge sharing could be promoted and used as a vital transformational tool or strategy before, during and post-mergers and incorporations of institutions of higher learning.

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