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South African higher education library mergers: what did they achieve?

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ABSTRACT

The years 2004-2008 saw government-imposed mergers of some of the South African higher education institutions with the aim to transform the sector. The government’s transformation agenda reflected in the National Plan for Higher Education included restructuring the institutional landscape, merging some of the institutions to among others; reduce duplication and overlap in programmes and service provision, increase students’ access to institutions, help build academic and administrative capacity, refocus and reshape the culture of the institutions into one of South Africa. Libraries also had to merge as components of these institutions. In October 2009, Tshwane University of Technology hosted a conference on ‘The impact of mergers on the South African Higher education system’. The conference afforded affected parties an opportunity to share experiences and learn from one another. The general feelings and observations expressed at the conference were that mergers had failed. Libraries are academic support entities which provide services to their parent institutions. This paper will assess perceptions of universities of technology libraries which came into existence as a result of mergers with particular focus on achievements of the mergers w.r.t. human, financial and physical resources.

Keywords: mergers; South African university of technology libraries; library mergers; merged library resourcing.
INTRODUCTION

Resource allocation is one of the key determinants of success or otherwise of an organisation’s ability to deliver on its mandate. With reference to the South African higher education environment in the period before 2004; i.e. before the mergers were implemented, the government viewed utilisation of resources as misaligned as there were too many institutions resulting in many layers of management, which in turn caused exorbitant expenditure on salaries in that there were too many executive, senior and other line-managers. There was also perceived duplication of positions in the operational levels. In the government’s assessment, there was no corresponding desired output; i.e. student success, throughput or graduate rates, relevance of curricula to the national skills need, or adequate infrastructure for students to have an excellent learning or research experience at the institutions. Moreover, the legacy of apartheid was perpetuated as reflected in the separate institutions for whites, blacks, coloureds and Indians. Integrated and non-racial institutions had to be created. To that end, the government resolved to create a number of new institutions through merging some in order to reduce expenditure on human resources and encourage sharing of available physical resources. The process saw the number of institutions reduce from 36 to 23. This resulted in mega-institutions which are, to a large extent, a challenge to manage efficiently with the given government subsidies and grants.

The 23 institutions were grouped into three types:

- Traditional universities
- Comprehensive universities, and
- Universities of technology

Shortly after the mergers, former technikons were renamed universities of technology to differentiate them from traditional and comprehensive universities. The following new universities of technology were created:

- Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT)
- Central University of Technology (CUT)
- Durban University of Technology (DUT)
- Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT)
- Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) and
• Vaal University of Technology (VUT).

Of the universities of technology, three came about as a result of mergers. Those are:
• CPUT,
• DUT, and
• TUT.

DEFINITIONS

• Comprehensive universities – new universities formed out of mergers, which offer both traditional university and vocational education.
• Institutions of higher learning – universities, former technikons and lately, universities of technology.
• Merged institutions as defined by the Department of Higher education & Training/Department of Education (DHET/DOE) – new institutions of higher learning formed, on government instruction, by two or more institutions coming together as equal partners.
• Technikons – higher education institutions that offered post-secondary school vocational education.
• Universities of technology – former technikons.

LITERATURE SURVEY

Not much has been published on higher education library mergers. The libraries had to merge as their parent institutions merged. The general conferences or workshops on higher education mergers did not have libraries on the programmes; e.g. the conference on ‘The impact of mergers on the South African Higher Education System’ held in 2009. Only one presentation featured from a library environment but it did not reflect on the success or not of the mergers w.r.t. resourcing.

On the other hand, higher education libraries held discussion forums at annual LIASA conferences (2004/2005). In 2006 the LIASA Kwa-Zulu-Natal branch held a mini-conference on library mergers at which staff of all levels were given a platform to present views on the mergers. At the time, the wounds were still raw and tempers high. The impression was that
the mergers had caused a lot of pain, trauma and chaos, and therefore failed. Since then, library mergers - especially their impact on higher education libraries - have not been discussed at regional or national platforms. Eight years on, have the perceptions changed?

**The merger outcomes**

‘Very few positivistic studies have been done on the relationship between merger goal attainment and perceptions about merger outcomes’. (Arnold, Stofile & Lillah 2013: 3). Jansen also observed that ‘Merger policy is seldom merger practice’ (2003: [49]).

**Staffing**

Jansen observed that ‘the state does not place a high premium on equity within the modalities of the various mergers’ ([38]) and that ‘the impact of mergers on staff, in all cases, has been devastating for the emotional and professional lives of all staff, at all levels’ (2003: [43]).

**Infrastructure**

The government expects of institutions to include resourcing for infrastructure - including library holdings - into their 3-year-rolling plans’. However, evidence from the responses is that institutions have not obtained any for the libraries. Jansen observed that ‘...the costs of aligning facilities in terms of technological and administrative infrastructure presented more contention than any perceived opportunities offered for expansion ( 2003: [43]).

**Funding**

Discussions or literature on the South African institutional mergers do not assess the effectiveness of library human resources provision, funding or library infrastructure for the new merged institutions.

**AIM OF THE STUDY**

The aim is to assess the success of the mergers in creating efficient university of technology libraries out of the three former technikon libraries w.r.t. provision of human, financial and physical resources for the libraries to provide services at an improved level as compared to before the mergers.
METHODOLOGY
This is a case study of three universities of technology in South Africa that came about as a result of government-imposed mergers of technikons in the early to mid-2000s. A questionnaire using both quantitative and qualitative questions was used to obtain data on the perceptions of the directors of library at the universities of technology regarding the success of the government’s goals for mergers of higher education institutions. The areas surveyed were human resources, funding and infrastructure. SurveyMonkey was used to collect the data and ensure anonymity of the participants.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY
The sample is small and targeted. The study was not aimed at all staff of the said institutions or meant to be comprehensive. It is acknowledged that the staff would most probably have different ideas from those of their directors, and that perceptions would differ even more from staff member to staff member. It is also acknowledged that the views of the directors may differ significantly from those of their staff. Also, some of the directors may or may have not been in the former technikons and may therefore not have experienced the mergers to the same extent as those who lived through them and probably contributed to what holds presently. Further, some of the directors may be for or against the mergers. Therefore, their responses were interpreted at face value.

Apart from the aforesaid, the survey was not extensive and may therefore not cover the extent of human resources, financial or infrastructural issues in the said libraries.

Further surveys need to be conducted for a deeper understanding. Assessment of the success of all mergers that resulted in new comprehensive or traditional universities, which involve other library managers and library staff, would give a larger sample which might yield a different set of perceptions and conclusions. A follow-up study that includes them would enrich the findings of the current exercise.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY
The current study is a first step in obtaining data on perceptions of those who lead the libraries of universities of technology which came about as a result of mergers. The response rate was 100% and all questions were answered. The study is therefore significant and the
findings can be used to address areas of improvement and for other merged library services to learn from those surveyed.

GOALS OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONAL MERGERS

Since government’s aim in creating institutional mergers was transformation, the success of libraries of these merged institutions should be assessed against the set objectives of the institutional mergers. Whilst no objectives were set for libraries in particular, some of the broader government objectives for the institutions apply to libraries. The goals for institutional mergers were

- An increased contribution to the solution of social problems
- A better standard of higher education
- An increase in training and development of higher education staff
- Increased student access
- Improved administrative governance of higher education institutions
- Curriculum restructuring
- Improved use of financial and human resources’ (Arnold, Stofile & Lillah 2013: 4).

This study focuses on the latter goal.

FINDINGS

All the libraries surveyed report to the academic environments and are satisfied with the situation. They have branch libraries ranging in number from 6 to 13. The numbers of students served range from 25,000 to 55,000.

Provision of human resources

66% of the participants indicated that the design and population of their current library organisational structure was based on the need to ensure that all existing personnel at the time of the merger retained jobs; while 34% used historical data to determine the needs per campus and they are satisfied with the staffing. Although ensuring job retention was a good criterion, it disadvantaged the libraries for the reason that the needs for serving a university were not considered. The participants stated that the demands of a university of technology differ from those of the former technikon as the former has to produce research - which was optional to technikons. This is one of the key indicators that the universities of technology libraries
require a different staffing strategy. All the libraries said they had met employment equity targets set by government. However, for 66%, it was also noted that meeting the targets was worthless as the service provision was not enhanced by providing all with jobs without due analysis of the needs of the new libraries.

In populating the organisational structure, only 34% considered suitability of the personnel for positions, as against 66% who used historical job incumbency – thus ignoring suitability of personnel to the purpose of the jobs. There was misalignment between organisational needs and placement of personnel.

With regard to staff morale, 66% indicated that the morale was low as evident in the mounting complaints and a high the rate of staff turnover. On the contrary, 34% said that their personnel were happy and taking advantage of new opportunities and personal growth from cultural diversity.

66% of the libraries were looking at re-aligning the organisational structures of their libraries to better align with institutional objectives.

Funding

Library collections:

Adequacy of library collections is the extent to which libraries are able to meet the needs of their clients. This includes inter-library loans or document delivery services used to supplement own collections. The latter relies on availability of funds to purchase required materials.

In all the libraries surveyed, over 60% of the budgets received for information resources are allocated to the development electronic resources and the rest to print. 66% of participants have realised growth in the budget for information resources although for some, increases in allocations had stagnated over the past few years.

Infrastructure:

66% of the libraries had not realised any improvement in infrastructure development since the merger in spite of the government’s intention to improve infrastructure for the merged
institutions to benefit students. None of the libraries perceived existing infrastructure as adequate.

**Library development**

Library development includes but is not limited to additional space, reorganisation of space, utilisation of relevant technologies, innovation, introduction of new services and enhancement of existing services to better serve the university community. It also refers to provision for growth of the library in relation to growth in student enrolment.

66% of the respondents had not received funding specifically for library development since the merger. However, each of the institutions had seen growth in library development w.r.t. one or more of the following: integration of information literacy training into curricula, statistics collection and analysis, establishment of an institutional repository, library e-learning for staff and setting up of e-tutorials, focused staff development and training, alignment of library services with university goals, postgraduate service with librarians especially for that, extension of a library and its renovation into a modern academic library.

Owing to the sizes of student bodies, libraries now have more students to serve and they need to provide new and different services because of trends in academic library services. New spaces and redesigning existing ones are required. All these enhance the quality of library services. But, theses improvements will not be achieved without targeted funding.

**Operational budget**

Another area of dissatisfaction is the operational budget received by 66% of the libraries. Among the reasons are that there is no formula for allocations, expressed needs had not been considered and budget allocations had been decreasing by the year.

**Whether library mergers enhanced the efficiency of library services**

66% of the participants are of the opinion that library mergers enhanced the efficiency of their libraries in that the libraries currently have at their disposal, more diverse collections and skills base. One participant said “we do things smarter and better”. Also, 66% said that their libraries were regarded by the institutions as a strategic partner in teaching, learning and research, especially where the library was not regarded as such before the merger. For 34%, there is misalignment between resourcing the libraries and the expectation of fulfilling
objectives that support the institutional core business. Therefore, it is not certain that the library is regarded as the institution’s strategic partner, although it reports to the academic environment.

Critical challenges brought about by the library mergers

The libraries view staffing and equity, embracing technology, limited budgets, the preparedness of institutions and their staff to go for mergers, lack of trust of each other’s professionalism as the critical challenges brought about by South African higher education library mergers.

DISCUSSION

According to the National Plan for Higher Education, institutional planning was to be linked to and include an analysis of supply-side factors such as institutional capacity in terms of staff, infrastructure, financial resources, etc. (CEPD 2001: 48). This was not the case among the 66% of libraries that participated in the study.

With respect to research support, the government expects institutions to have appropriate ‘research infrastructure in terms of library holdings’ (CEPD 2001: 68). They acknowledge that building research capacity and infrastructure may take time and depends on availability of resources.

In order to access funds for research support, institutions are to submit to the government, as part of their 3-year-rolling plans, plans for building research capacity in terms of qualified staff and appropriate infrastructure, staff development and infrastructure development plans (CEPD 2001: 72).

Further, the government acknowledged that successful implementation of the National Plan for Higher Education was dependent on securing adequate funding for restructuring and re-engineering, in particular, for redress purposes. They were also aware of the necessity for detailed cost analyses of the financial implications of the implementation of the plan. The analyses would be used as a basis for supporting the securing of additional resources. (CEPD 2001: 87). Unfortunately, provisions did not include libraries in the majority of those surveyed.
It is evident that in at least 66% of the institutions, provision for libraries was left out of the submissions to the government.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has shown that in the majority of the libraries surveyed, there has not been improvement in the provision of human resources and funding since the mergers. Provision is not satisfactory and for some it has either been decreasing by the year or it stagnated. There is no formula for funding libraries. Without required funding, the libraries lag behind in developing services and reorganising existing space to benefit students. Only 34% of the libraries have seen improvement in human resources and funding provision. There has not been improvement of any of the libraries’ infrastructure since the mergers took place. The libraries utilise infrastructure that existed before the mergers. None of the libraries is satisfied with the existing infrastructure.

It is commendable that the majority of the libraries plan to re-engineer their environments to better align organisational structures and human resources deployment with the demands of provision of service to a university of technology rather than continue with misaligned utilisation of resources.

It is also good to learn that at least 34% of those surveyed have a relatively happy workforce who see new opportunities and value the diversity of cultures brought about by the merger.

Institutions should reconsider resourcing of the libraries in line with merger principles in order to strengthen the quality of services provided. Government should introduce mechanisms to ensure alignment of resource provision to institutions with their set outcomes. Otherwise, mergers will continue to be perceived as a stumbling block to development in higher education rather than an enabler that they were meant to be.
REFERENCES


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