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# Report neatly sidesteps issues

Will the proposal to merge universities really help the higher education crisis? Professor Jonathan Jansen, dean of education at Pretoria University, has doubts

- The merging of certain regional universities and technikons;
- The creation of a single institution offering distance education;
- The extension of the life of a degree course from three to four years;
- The creation of three main institutional types, namely so-called "bedrock institutions" offering mainly undergraduate degrees; "comprehensive" institutions offering the full suite of qualifications from undergraduate to doctoral level research programmes, and (curiously) institutions that also offer a range of programmes but with selective doctoral level programmes.

### Harsh

The report has obvious strengths, acknowledging the crisis in higher education and that the status and performance of institutions should not be taken as self evident. It makes specific cases for the combination of institutions in different regions and is very responsive to the harsh criticism of its "discussion document" released two months ago.

Yet these recommendations may meet criticism, even resistance, among the leadership of both black and white universities, several of whom have already sought emergency meetings with the minister. And for good reason. The report is dense, bureaucratic and uninspiring, and marked by ambivalence on key issues. Some key proposals are poorly motivated, raising the question: What is the restructuring of universities and technikons really for?

Second, it lacks the necessary courage to deal effectively with what motivated the original inquiry, namely, what to do with dysfunctional universities on the verge of self-closure. Here, the report is adamant there will be no closures, only mergers or "combinations". This is an

### TREFWOORDE

1 Bybe

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3 Jansen J.

4 Weerstand

5 Unobes

6 Voorstelle

7 Samestelling

8 Univeriteite

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# INSTITUUT VIR EIETDSE GESKIEDENIS

Die Universiteit van die Oranje-Vrystaat



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unfortunate language game for in joining weak and strong institutions weaker ones invariably are fully absorbed into the stronger partner, losing corporate and institutional identities. Effectively, the weaker (black) institution would have been shut down. The reality is higher education cannot be effectively restructured without a mix of closures and combinations, which means taking some tough decisions about universities on the verge of collapse.

This raises the question: Under what conditions can mergers make higher education institutions more competitive and resilient in the harsh global economy facing SA? These cannot be the simple-minded kinds of mergers proposed for some regions: A combination bringing the universities of the Transkei, Fort Hare and Rhodes into a single institution would be likely to seriously erode higher education in that region.

Rhodes University, a leading provider of information technology graduates for the global economy, which has developed a self-sustainable plan for itself, would lose that competitive edge in any combination with its crisis-ridden sister institutions. The plan should be to transform Rhodes itself, so staff, leadership and students are representative of the racial and gender spread in rural Eastern Cape.

The tough decision needs to be made: Some institutions should be closed down.

But here the report is silent. Should we assume that because the University of the North (the most crisis-ridden black university) is not mentioned in these combinations, that it would be allowed to slide into self-closure? Or that failure to mention the main campus of the University of Zululand (as opposed to the Universities of Durban-Westville and Natal) stems from a lack of political courage to confront its chancellor, president of the Inkatha Freedom Party?

## Courage

Must we assume that the soft-treading of the task team on the merging of the Western Cape universities (as opposed to the Eastern Cape) reflects sensitivity to the New National Party power bloc in places like Stellenbosch or, worse, the authority of the chairman of the task team, whose struggle to create "a world class African university" at UCT would be jeopardised by combinations with other regional institutions?

But by concentrating on the inefficiencies in the existing system of higher education, this report looks very different from the more inspired white paper on higher education, which was at pains to

position South Africa competitively in the globalised knowledge economy.

Perhaps the most puzzling omission in the report is the failure to provide a systematic analysis of what will be the single most important determinant of the "size" of higher education in the next 10 to 15 years, namely, HIV/Aids.

It's hard to believe the Aids conference just ended in Durban, pointed to the educational consequences of rampant HIV infection in southern Africa. Yet the task team report is blind to this crucial determinant of whether we will have the numbers of healthy students to make up the minimum numbers required for sustainable higher education in South Africa.

Maybe the task team ran out of ideas about how to transform the higher education system through an outward looking, strategic positioning of the country's universities and technikons, and through creative strategies for empowering more black and women scholars to assume leadership in our best institutions. But maybe this wasn't the task team's original goal.

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